

## Who is the greatest?

Mark 9.30-37

Thursday evening was a wonderful occasion as we welcomed Wendy to the Minster and saw her duly licensed by the Bishop. The choir was on wonderful form, the Music Group blended in effortlessly, Bishop Alison enthused us all, and it was a great celebration of ministry.

For me, I knew it was all going to be fine once I had got everyone into the procession. You may not be aware of this, but Anglican processions reveal a carefully graduated hierarchy, starting with the smallest chorister and ending with the Bishop. They make the English class system look positively egalitarian. When I was on the staff of a Cathedral, I had a colleague, the Precentor, whose special responsibility it was to organise the Processions and to pronounce upon the order of precedence - such questions as whether the Spanish Ambassador should go before or after the High Sheriff of Northamptonshire - because obviously both of them are inferior to the deputy lord Lieutenant of Rutland. I used to look on in awe as the Precentor determined who was the greatest - and I'm glad I paid attention, because it allowed me to look as though I knew what I was doing last Thursday night.

In this morning's Gospel reading we see that the disciples needed a Precentor, because they were arguing about who was the greatest. It's like a scene from a school playground isn't it: 'my dad's bigger than your dad.' But unfortunately it's set the tone for the church ever since.

Let me give you another slightly absurd example from my rich store of Cathedral stories. As a Chapter we decided to invest in a set of new maroon cassocks, a kind of team strip, a task I was happy to entrust to the precentor. He'll find his way through the Wippell's catalogue better than me, I thought. He'll get us all the same things. And when my new cassock arrived it seemed fine - until the first time we all robed up together, and I realised that my cincture - a kind of cummerbund around your tummy - didn't have any tassles on it and theirs all did! There's nothing more humiliating than robing up in the vestry when everyone else's cincture has tassles and yours doesn't. When I tackled him about it, the precentor maintained that he was simply attempting to show sensitivity to my Low Church inclinations and that he didn't think I would really want tassles on my cincture. In this, he was entirely correct; but I knew that he knew that all the vergers would sneer at me because my cincture didn't have any tassles.

However I bear no grudge. Because the truth is, there's a bit of Precentor in all of us. The need to make infinite gradations in status, to measure ourselves against others and know our place in the pecking order, is part of the human condition. All too often

churches are places of polite and not so polite struggles for power, designed to establish who is the greatest; who is allowed access to the photocopier, who decides what kind of coffee we get to drink after the service, who controls the rotas, who gets to sit where it's warm or where you can actually hear. At my induction last December I was presented with keys to all of the five churches where I was to minister; but after the service the keys to at least two of the churches were taken back again. And I still can't get in them unsupervised.

And sadly, during the course of my ordained ministry, I have come across too many instances of people who have found a role and a status in the church which they have used as a source of power - a way of denying others a role, a way of controlling what can and what can't happen, a way of forging an identity based on who's in and who's out.

I say that without making any attempt to think of specific examples from Beverley Minster, but I've come across it frequently in other places, and I'm sure I'm not immune from it myself - because, like those first disciples, we're all human, and we find it hard to trust the Lord Jesus for our security and status and identity, rather than forging it ourselves in competition with others.

When we give in to this temptation to turn our ministries inwards and use them for our own benefit instead of serving others, the people who miss out are precisely the people whom the Church is called to serve - those on the edge, those who have no voice, no status, no power. When we treat the Church as our possession, our club, our fiefdom or empire, we unconsciously exclude the very people we are supposed to be serving; those with disabilities; those who are sick or frail and can't get to church very often; those who have little or no faith and don't know how churches work; those who have English as a second language and can't join in with the insiders so easily; those who are poorly educated or who have chaotic family backgrounds who simply don't know how to make their voices heard; those with dementia or other forms of mental illness which have caused them to lose confidence. These are the people for whom the church is supposed to be a sanctuary, a place of refuge and safety; not an arena where subtle gladiatorial games are played out to decide who really matters.

Jesus exposes the disciples' worldly power games, their concern to be the greatest, by taking a young child and saying: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.' Over the last decade or so, our eyes have gradually opened to the extent to which children have been at risk in our society. We used to regard people who abused children as exceptionally depraved and wicked. But as story after story has revealed the extent of the problem, with children abused in care homes and sports clubs, at the hands of celebrities and rock stars, in families and, most appallingly in the church, it has become clear that the problem is much greater than a just few monstrous

individuals. We live in a society obsessed with power, where power is understood as competitive, as something always asserted at someone else's expense. Those without power, and especially children, are therefore especially at risk, not just from those who are peculiarly perverted, but from a much wider range of people trying to overcome their own sense of powerlessness. By making a child the focus for his teaching, Jesus opens up the possibility of the church as a non-competitive community, as a sanctuary and a safe space where people can be set free from the need to prove themselves in others' eyes. The church is supposed to be a community based on an equality of helplessness and vulnerability, making us open to God's grace, not on productivity or usefulness or strength. It's a wonderful vision if only we could make it a reality, like for example the church in Didsbury becoming more inclusive following the suicide of a 14 year old girl, who was worried because she was gay. When we run the Everybody Welcome course in a couple of weeks, that will help us to judge how open and accepting and inclusive and genuinely welcoming we really are, and hopefully to become more so.

I finish with another Cathedral story. We used to meet every morning for Holy Communion at 7.30. It was full of dignitaries: the Dean, the residentiary Canons, a virger, sometimes the Bishop, and one or two others. Latterly we were joined several times a week by Carol, a lady in her 70s, struggling with the onset of dementia. She found the Cathedral to be a safe place and she was often there. As her illness progressed, she became more child-like. One morning I was standing next to her in a semi-circle about to receive Communion as a colleague was taking the service and she suddenly turned to me and beamed and rubbed my arm and said: 'This is nice, isn't it?'

For a moment the least among us was the greatest and the last had come first. I love that thread running through the Gospels turning everything upside down:

- the first shall be last and the last shall be first
- he has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek
- he has hidden these things from wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants
- I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance
- it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick
- the greatest in God's kingdom are those who are servants
- all who humble themselves will be exalted.
- blessed are those who are poor: theirs is the kingdom of God.
- blessed are those who are hungry; they will be filled
- blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

This vision is profoundly beautiful. It is good news not just for those who are least in the eyes of the world, but for all of us trapped in anxiety about our status or who are tempted to think we are safe and important because of our role or position in church.

We are exalted by virtue of our baptism. We have been set free from our inner Precentor. It doesn't matter whereabouts in the procession you come. The important thing is to see the greatness in others and the abundance of God's grace.

*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service in Beverley Minster on 23 September 2018  
by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker,.*