

Jesus in the house of true greatness. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 2 April 2014.

As you know, we are still part way through a series of talks about houses which played a part in the life of our Lord Jesus when He was here in the world. The title for today's talk is 'Jesus in the house of true greatness'. Combining together the three accounts we have of this incident,¹ we read :

While everyone marvelled at all things which Jesus did, He taught His disciples, saying, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him. And when He has been killed, after three days He shall rise again'.

But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask Him.

And they came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?'²

But at first they kept silent, for on the way they had been arguing with one another about which of them was the greatest.

Then they asked Him, 'Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

And He sat down and called the twelve around Him.³ And He said to them, 'If anyone desires to be first, he must become last of all and servant of all'.

And then He called to Him a young child, and stood him beside Him. And taking him in His arms, He said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn around and become like young children, you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven! Whoever humbles himself like this young child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'.

On their journey with Jesus to Capernaum, the disciples were fired with selfish ambition and disputed about their relative greatness – about who, so to speak, would be 'at the top of the table' in God's kingdom.

Recent events may well have prompted their heated discussion. Not only had Peter been singled out by name a short time ago as the object of the Lord's blessing,⁴ but Peter, James and John had also been favoured above the other disciples with a special and unique experience of the Lord's glory and majesty.⁵ It may well be that these events had triggered the disciples' argument.

As we read, Jesus had noted their dispute, but had said nothing – until, that is, they arrived at their destination and entered a house.⁶

But the Lord's question about the nature of their argument was met by stony silence on their part. Clearly they felt not a little embarrassed and ashamed of themselves. And *well* they might. For not long before they had set out on their journey, Jesus had spoken – and that not for the first time – of His forthcoming suffering and death. But, because the disciples were then thinking in terms only of Jesus as Messiah shortly leading the nation of Israel to victory over the ruling Roman power, as we read, they failed to grasp what He was telling them.

But what irony! Instead of contemplating and questioning what Jesus meant when He spoke of His approaching rejection and passion, their minds were occupied alone with their own status and importance. Small wonder they were reluctant to reveal what it was they had been arguing about.

When He had spoken to them about His rejection and death they had been afraid to ask Him; now, initially, they are ashamed to answer Him.⁷

Although, in time, they *did* pluck up the courage to blurt out their question, asking Him which of them 'would be the greatest' in God's kingdom.

I wonder whether *those* words, 'the greatest', ring any bells with you?

It just so happens that only last week the death was widely reported of the American boxer, famous not only for his undisputed boxing ability, but for his repeated claim, 'I am the greatest'. But the reported death on 27 March of Cassius Clay was, in the well-known words of Mark Twain, 'an exaggeration'.⁸ Indeed, now in his 74th year,⁹ he is very much alive. It was all a (rather sick) hoax.¹⁰ But, alas, Muhammad Ali, as Cassius Clay prefers to be known, was by no means the only person wanting to be recognised as 'the greatest'.

Clearly, our Lord's original disciples – like so many before and since – were smitten with the same bug.

But, in direct answer to the disciples' question as to which of them would be greatest in God's kingdom, Jesus told them plainly, 'If anyone desires to be first, he must become last of all, and servant of all'. In other words, in God's reckoning, those are seen to be the highest who take the lowest place ... if you like, that the way to go up in God's esteem is to go down in our own ... that the passport to true greatness and to eminence in the kingdom of God consists not in being served but in serving.

And then, to press His point home, Jesus called to Him a young boy – one old enough to walk and to stand on his own, but little enough to be taken by Jesus into His arms. Clearly then, there was nothing about our Lord's demeanour or character to frighten or intimidate the young child, who readily came to Him.

When speaking of God's people, the Old Testament says that, and I quote, the Lord God 'will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms'.¹¹ Behold, here then, that same 'Lord God' – now having entered the world as a man – taking, so to speak, one such 'lamb' in His arms.¹²

I suspect that it surprised – indeed, quite likely shocked – the disciples that our Lord should choose a young child to be His object lesson – to be His means of instructing them. Apart from the fact that people in the ancient Near East regarded children as relatively insignificant and vastly inferior to adults, normally children are taught to look to adults for examples to follow.

But here Jesus turned everything on its head by urging His disciples to follow the example of a young child – here held up, not so much as a model of innocence or purity, but of humility and trust. For here was one who, altogether unlike the disciples at the time, was modest and unassuming, free from all rivalry, envy and self-seeking. And along with such humility came childlike trust.

By squabbling over which of them was to be the greatest, the disciples had behaved in a most childish way. In response, Jesus warned them that they urgently needed to change from being *childish* to being *childlike* – childlike, that is, in their faith and trust ... that unless they did 'turn around and become like young children', they would 'never (they would 'by no means'¹³) *enter into* the kingdom of heaven' ... let alone be *the greatest in it!*

In closing, we need to listen to our Lord's words, spoken soon after, following another dispute among the disciples about positions of prominence in His kingdom ... on that occasion directing their attention, not to a young child as their model, but to His own example – 'even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'.¹⁴

Footnotes

¹ Matt. 18. 1-6; Mark 9. 31-37 ; Luke 9. 43-48.

² Good News Bible.

³ This expression reconciles 'stood him in their midst', Matt. 18. 3; Mark 9. 36, with 'stood him by Him ('by His side')', Luke 9. 47.

⁴ Matt. 16. 17.

⁵ Matt. 17. 1-3.

⁶ Just possibly the house of Simon Peter at Capernaum.

⁷ The disciples' grief (Matt. 17. 23) certainly proved short lived!

⁸ See ... <http://oupacademic.tumblr.com/post/48310773463/misquotation-reports-of-my-death-have-been-greatly>

⁹ Born 17 January 1942.

¹⁰ See ... <http://en.mediamass.net/people/muhammad-ali/deathhoax.html>

¹¹ Isa. 40. 11.

¹² Cf. 'underneath are the everlasting arms', Deut. 33. 27.

¹³ Emphatic – a double negative.

¹⁴ Mark 10. 35-45.