

The Way to Greatness & The Way of the Cross

1. The Unending Quest for Greatness

The unending quest for greatness can be found in pretty much any area of life.

Sport – the quest to be ‘the greatest team in the world’ – another world cup, another world champ.

Work – we strive to be ‘the greatest company in this industry or that field’

Leisure – we long to have ‘the best holiday ever’

Relationships – the search for ‘the perfect man’ & for men, the search for ‘a woman who likes me’.

In fact, greatness is so much part of the air that we breath, that I reckon I can give you a quote about greatness and you’ll be able to tell me who said it.

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them”

– William Shakespeare – Twelfth Night

“The price of greatness is responsibility” – Winston Churchill

“The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” – Mahatma Gandhi

Greatness is so embedded in our psyche that we even think deeply about what stops greatness. Jessica Hagy, a contributor to Forbes magazine, wrote an article about the 6 enemies of greatness.

Enemy 1) Availability- We often settle for what’s available, and what’s available isn’t always great.

“Because it was there,” is an okay reason to climb a mountain, but not a very good reason to take a job or a free sample at the supermarket.

Enemy 2) Ignorance - If we don’t know how to make something great, we simply won’t. If we don’t know that greatness is possible, we won’t bother attempting it. All too often, we literally do not know any better than good enough.

Enemy 3) Committees - Nothing destroys a good idea faster than a mandatory consensus. The lowest common denominator is never a high standard.

Enemy 4) Comfort - Why pursue greatness when you’ve already got 324 channels and a recliner? Pass the dip and forget about your grand designs.

Enemy 5) Momentum - If you’ve been doing what you’re doing for years and it’s not-so-great, you are in a rut. Many people refer to these ruts as careers.

Enemy 6) Passivity - There’s a difference between being agreeable and agreeing to everything. Trust the little internal voice that tells you, “this is a bad idea.”

As we turn to Mark’s gospel, Jesus tackles this quest for greatness head on.

In fact, not only does Jesus tackle this quest for greatness head on – Jesus turns it on its head.

2. The Way to Jerusalem (vv. 30-31, 34)

But before we get to Jesus tackling greatness...there's another facet of our culture I need to point out. We live in a self-absorbed world, where capturing the moment is more important than living the moment.

And in the midst of this self-absorption – one word gets thrown around to describe what is happening.

That word is 'journey'. Whether it be romance reality T.V – “where this journey will take us”

Or whether it be the athlete who's won a gold medal – “it's been a wonderful journey”

Or whether it be the geek who's discovered he can talk to women –

“I've grown so much on this journey . I never would've though I could...”

Call me simple. Call me stupid. But you need to have a destination, for your journey to make sense.

So. Coming back to Jesus.

Jesus has a destination for his journey.

The destination for Jesus is Jerusalem.

But more, Jesus' destination is not just a city, but what will happen in that city. << read vv. 31 >>

Now, you may have read that many times before, but did you catch the irony in the pun?

The enemy of the Son of Man is Man! << Son of Man explanation >>

The fate of Jesus is death at the hands of – not the devil, not some spiritual super being,
but at the hands of humanity.

As one commentator writes –

“Mankind will try to take the uncertainty out of its future by exercising power over God”

And this will all happen at Jerusalem. This will all go down in the city which was the King's city!

But did you notice something strange - Jesus doesn't want anyone to know his current location. << v. 30 >>

Jesus hasn't updated his Facebook page with his 'location' and a picture of the food he is eating.

Why doesn't Jesus want anyone to know where he is?

Why does Jesus want to fly under the radar now?

Because there is a massive chasm between what Jesus knows will happen at Jerusalem,

And what the disciples, and the crowds, and all of his followers want to happen at Jerusalem.

Jesus knows the destination of Jerusalem means that he will die.

The disciples, the crowds, all his followers want Jesus to be the promised glorious king of Israel,

Who will smash all of God's enemies, and establish a new kingdom on earth for God's people.

Jesus destination is not pretty, not the glorious victory of a successful presidential campaign.

Jesus destination is death in Jerusalem.

3. The Misunderstanding & Fear of the disciples (vv. 32-34)

On a different take, have you ever been in a situation where you've totally misunderstood what is happening and have had a tremendous fear?

The disciples demonstrate their fear and their misunderstanding as Jesus' comes to question them. For whilst Jesus' was focussed on the destination of the journey to Jerusalem, The disciples' sheer inability to comprehend the mission of Jesus happens every time Jesus' explains his goal. Last week, and back in Chapter 8, Jesus explains that he goes to die in Jesus and what does Peter do? You can almost hear Peter say to Jesus, "Nah, mate, nah. That can't be right buddy. You're the messiah" But if you stop and pause for a moment, the modern day equivalent, would be saying to the Queen, "Heya, Lizzie, heya, matey, I know you think you know what you're doing I know you think you know, as the longest serving Queen, but let me tell you..."

And so here in our passage, there is a new level of gross incomprehension by the disciples. << vv. 32-34 >> And their gross incomprehension is revealed in their fear of asking Jesus about his mission in Jerusalem. That is, they'll shut their eyes, and choose to remain ignorant about Jesus' real purpose, And instead have a discussion about who will be the greatest amongst themselves.

Now, the reason why such insight is given into the disciples, is not simply so we can beat up on them. No. The point Mark is marking is that prior to Jesus' death no one is able to understand Jesus. No one is able to grasp who he is, and the meaning of what he does.

So, at this juncture, the disciple's ignoring of Jesus demonstrates they are part of the problem too.

Often we stress the terrible betrayal of Jesus by Judas, and the terrible action that he took. And yet we miss the terrible inaction the disciples. They stood by and watched. Just as they stand by Jesus, here, afraid to take action, so too, at his death fear will lead to inaction.

4. Greatness *in God's eyes* (v. 35 see also Isaiah 53)

And so we come to the real crux of the matter – greatness.
Greatness, not in our eyes, but in God's eyes.

Jesus speaks to the twelve these words that have been embedded in the DNA of Christianity.
“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”

Now, the Pharisee in me thinks ...

“so does that mean if it's out of 100, that the person who comes 50 will still be 50?”

But that misses the ridiculously revolutionary nature of this statement...

If I said to Malcolm Turnbull,

“the way that become Prime Minister is by becoming the weakest,
the most pathetic, most insignificant back bencher.

In fact, make sure that everyone treats you like dirt,
and make sure that you give in to everyone's demands...”

well, Malcolm Turnbull would just laugh in my face!

And yet, here, not just a prime ministerial wannabe, not just any head of any country is on view.
No, here is God's chosen king, the man appointed by God to rule over all nations and people,
And he's the one who says – “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all”!

Why? Why would the saviour of the world say such a thing?

The clue is back in our reading from Isaiah 53:10 –

“Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin ...”

Jesus life was given as an offering for sin.

Jesus willing gave up his life in order to bring us back to God.

To put it another way,

The greatness of Jesus comes not from his use of his power and authority, but from the restraint of his power.

Jesus takes the paradigm of greatness and turns it upside-down.

The power to fling stars into space – willingly given up to offer his life for our rebellion against God.

5. A Child *that is welcomed* (vv. 36-37)

And so, Jesus shifts the focus from himself, to the smallest, most insignificant people nearby – the children. But before we get to the children, we need to understand our own cultural baggage attached to the kids. For the baggage we have raising kids today is one word, that I've just made up – Child-olatry. Child-olatry – the turning of children into an idol to be worshipped.

Now, Australians generally aren't guilty of the Toddlers and Tiara's plastic-ifying kids. But in terms of getting our kids ahead in education, all sorts of things are done. Children are 'hothouse'd', their education outsourced, kids parties are now social status events... There is no expense spared to get your child ahead, in whatever area of life.

In Jesus' time there wasn't the same extremes of child-olatry.

Children were seen for what they are – weak, powerless, helpless. So for Jesus to scoop up a little child – that's totally unexpected. v. 36. Even more, for Jesus to state – “welcoming a child is welcoming me” – its absolutely preposterous!

Think of the least important member of our society.

And since we like to think of our country as a meritocracy

– where you get what you earn, you get ahead by hard work, merit for man power

The least important member of our society is the one who contributes the least, and uses the most resources.

Think of the person living in a housing commission house, no intention of working, every intention to live off the system.

Now, if I turned to you and said – welcome them, and you've welcomed me – there would be a certain offence taken. There'd be a certain more outrage.

Jesus takes the least significant member of his society – a child, and states – welcome them, welcome me.

The priority system in God's kingdom is profoundly different from our priority system.

The decision making priorities for Jesus invert the paradigm of both our culture, and the culture of his day.

The smallest is the greatest, and the greatest is the smallest, in the kingdom of God.

6. Jesus, Greatness & Us

So, to finish, how do we make sense of Jesus, his Greatness and impact on us?

- 1) We need to reflect upon the journey of our life.

For our journey in life makes sense only if we understand our destination.

Our destination makes sense only if we grasp the magnitude of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

For as much as we would like to point the finger back to Judas & the Pharisees, the Romans,

It is because of our attempts at exercising power of God,

to be in charge of our own lives that Jesus came to die for us.

Our life makes sense only if we see our destination as being restored in our relationship to God.

Our life makes sense only if we see that we can do nothing, but Jesus has done everything.

- 2) We need to move from misunderstanding and fear to understanding and action.

That is, if Jesus is who he said he is. If Jesus is God's king who died and rose again,

Then the only logical, rational course of action is to devote our lives to him.

To do anything else, would be the equivalent of punching the life saver in the face,

after he's just rescued you from drowning in the surf!

- 3) We need to invert the power paradigm.

We need to invert our attitude to greatness.

Stop climbing, stop grappling, stop grasping for the shifting sands of power that slip through our fingers.

Stop thinking that we have the power, authority and right to approach God on our terms.

Instead we need to come to Jesus in simple dependent trust.

- 4) Finally, know that on this basis, Jesus welcomes us into his kingdom.

Know that God welcomes us into his heavenly city.

Rejoice for we are citizens of heaven, and this can never be taken from us.

<< Aside – application for baptism of Jonathan >>

Let's pray.