Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

We reflected a little bit last week on who Jesus is to us, then we asked ourselves: who are we in response to who Jesus is to us, and what all that necessarily means to the way we behave in the world.

And this week’s gospel seems to take that question a bit further; it asks: who are we in relation to each other. It all seems to boil down to a matter of identity.

It has been said that there are two reasons for everything we do – the right reason and the real reason. The right reason is the one we will cite if we are asked – and often the one we will try to convince ourselves is our true reason. But the real reason is the one we know deep down and sometimes would rather hide from the rest of the world, because we know that, at rock bottom, it doesn’t stand scrutiny or justify what we have decided. And if we are in the process of becoming more like the Christ we claim to follow, then we need to be sufficiently self-aware to see and understand both of those.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus and the disciples were walking along engaged in various conversations presumably, and then when they reached their destination and got into the house, Jesus asked what they had been arguing about. I do wonder though whether Jesus did actually know the answer but wanted the disciples to articulate the issue that was causing such debate among them – because look at what Mark then records: They were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. It is significant that their response to his questions was silence.

Waiting for someone else to admit fault first? Trying to work out the right answer, rather than admitting to the real answer? We will never know. But certainly we can conclude that the discussion about who was the greatest was based on ambition and status, not on the example and teaching Jesus had always given them.

Whatever it was, the silence gave them plenty of time to know where they had gone wrong before Jesus had to say anything at all.

On one of the placements I did as an ordinand, a trainee priest, a wise clergyman told me that any gathering of clergy results sooner or later in a ‘my parish is doing better then yours’ battle. They compare numbers in the congregation or on the Electoral roll, or how many baptisms/weddings/funerals they conduct…or any one of a dozen other statistics easily available. And now that I am privy to these gatherings, I can vouch for the truth of that, although it is usually done in a very gentle way that masquerades as pastoral concern for the other party, or else as a reason why the bragger is so tired, but it definitely fits into the same category as the disciples arguing about who is the greatest. I must be the greatest because my congregation is bigger than yours, is the message. Rubbish.

So although I want to join in – and it’s really hard not to when others are at it – I do try quite hard not to get sucked in.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the observation that this is such childish behaviour, this whole greatness thing. And in many ways, certainly in terms of growing in Christ-like action and being, that is exactly what we are – children. But we need to be children at least trying to grow up.

There is tension within our Christian understanding: on the one hand we are the lowest of the low, dust and ashes, yet on the other hand we are sons and daughters of a great king. And we need to find ways of holding those two together in such a way that our greatness doesn’t cause us to come into opposition with one another.

Dorothy Day, who died in 1980, was an American Roman Catholic social activist who campaigned for workers’ rights and the poor and homeless, and she said of childbirth: if I had created the best painting or sculpture or symphony, I couldn’t have felt myself a more exalted creator than when they put my baby into my arms. And with that came, she said, the need to praise and adore. Quite rightly, because if we remember to see ourselves as children of a great king, then that should lead us to praise and gratitude, since we have done nothing to deserve it; not to self-aggrandisement. And the reason of course why not self-aggrandisement, is because absolutely everyone we meet is also a child of the same king.

The New Testament reading from James spells out that jealousy and quarrelling lead to a community that rapidly disintegrates: Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind, he says.

Not surprisingly, the teaching of Jesus, echoed by James, was that the answer to the problems caused by jealousy and ambition is to practise humility, to be the lowest, not to argue to be the greatest. And not the Uriah Heap sort of humble, either, but the genuine humble that seeks to put the needs of others before our own.

This anti-ambition thing sounds pretty straightforward to grasp, but is much harder to accomplish. I heard an interesting quote this week, that ran: We are all shareholders in the global business of an inferiority complex - which seemed a very odd turn of phrase, but when I thought about it, I could see its point. Maybe we are all scourged by a sense of inferiority when we compare ourselves with other people: it would certainly go some way to explaining why we feel the need to make ourselves seem ever more important with a veneer of plastic Facebook or Instagram perfection, and most crucially why there has been such an explosion of mental health issues among our children and young people.

Future in Mind is a report of the Children and Young people’s Mental Health Task Force and it states that one in every ten of our children currently experiences mental health issues such as depression or anxiety – that’s about three children in every class. And that makes them more likely to have problems with their mental health in later life too.

So knowing ourselves to be loved children – of God and of our human family – is one of the key things we need. If we stop constantly aspiring to be better than the next person, we can rejoice in having sufficient.

James and John wanted to sit at the right and left side of Jesus. Peter thought he could walk on water. All the disciples had ambitions but had to learn that the requirement for greatness was humility.

However, note that Jesus didn’t say: You shouldn’t want to be first. He said: Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. He isn’t telling us not to be great; he is saying that the definition of great is not what the world thinks it means. Being the best in worldly terms involves human effort, climbing over other people, exerting ourselves with still no guarantee of success.

But being lowly is within the reach of all of us, even if it is not our immediate inclination. I seem to be quoting Martin Luther King a lot at the moment – maybe because he is so eminently quotable, but he said: Anyone can be great because everyone can serve. We can do this – but, coming back to what I said at the beginning: we do it with a combination of listening to the teaching of Jesus and having the space to learn for ourselves as we reflect on the times when things work and the times when they don’t.

We need some direction from Jesus, but we grow when we are also given the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them, when we are given chances to reflect, to hear the still small voice, to reach our own conclusions.

Jesus asked: What were you arguing about on the way? He knew the answer and could just have given them a telling off for their lack of brotherly love. Instead he let them learn, he gave them time to reflect on the answer they might have been tempted to give and the real answer lurking just underneath.

May we all make silence in which to answer Jesus’ questions – and may we have the grace and patience to offer that to others too.

**Amen**