



17 October – 23 October 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

We live in a world where the quest for greatness has become almost obsessive. Reality television offers the promise of fame and wealth to anyone willing to put themselves "out there". Everything – from corporations to churches to individuals – is measured by the size of buildings, bank accounts or networks. And, while the growth of social media has connected us as never before, it has also created a whole new competition for greatness as we strive for ever increasing numbers of "friends," followers," or "visitors".

This desire to be "special" or "exceptional" is not new. James and John wrestled with it as they secretly approached Jesus hoping to secure the best seats in God's Reign. The other disciples had it too, which is why they got so upset when they heard what James and John had done. In the Old Testament, Job, who had perhaps become a little too obsessed with his own righteous suffering, was faced with a God who reminded him of his place, and, in the Isaiah reading we see this God revealed in the Suffering Servant who makes no claim to greatness but saves his people.

This week we will be faced with two very important challenges. The first is to define greatness differently – in terms of service and sacrifice for others. The second challenge is to give up our quest to be extraordinary, and embrace the simplicity, the humility, and the ordinariness of following Jesus just where we are. In a world driven crazy by the quest for greatness, embracing the glory of our own ordinary lives may be one of the most significant contributions we can make!

SUNDAY 17 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Mark 10:35-45

Reflect: The disciples had heard Jesus talk about God's Reign for quite some time, but they still hadn't understood it. Even after hearing Jesus predict his death more than once, James and John still thought that the "glory" Jesus spoke of would be about power, wealth and recognition – and they wanted some of that. So, they asked Jesus for the best seats – at his side, as advisors to the Monarch of God's Reign. Imagine how they must have dreamed of the praise they would receive, and the special treatment they would enjoy.

But even though they thought they had managed to get in before anyone else, Jesus told them that those places were already reserved. What they didn't know was that, when Jesus spoke about thrones and crowns, he meant the cross where he would be mocked as "king of the Jews" and would wear a crown of thorns. This is where God's glory would be revealed – and while James and John would both ultimately suffer for Jesus, the places beside him in this "glory" were reserved for two criminals who were crucified on his right and left.

The glory of following Jesus is not in receiving special treatment – not from God nor anyone else. It is in sharing in the life-giving sacrifice of Jesus. It is in making our lives matter by participating in God's mission in the world. It is in learning that the true joy in life is not to be served, but to give oneself in service to others that is meaningful and that leaves the world a better place. How can you embrace this glory today?

Do: It is common to praise God for God's greatness and glory, or to celebrate the cross because of the glory it offers us. But we seldom celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus as an example for us to follow. We seldom praise God for the opportunity to share in Christlike acts of service. Today, try to praise God for the gift of humility and sacrificial service, and see what impact it has on your life.

Pray: For inviting me to share in your mission of selflessly serving the world, O God, I give you praise.

MONDAY 18 OCTOBER 2021

Read: 1 Samuel 8:1-18

Reflect: From our point of view, it seems amazing that the people of Israel would ask God to give them a human king. They had experienced God's liberation and salvation so many times that you would expect them to want God to remain their Monarch forever. But, like us, the people of Israel sometimes got confused and afraid. They often ended up being strongly influenced by the values of the world around them, rather than those of God's Reign. This is why we, who face the same temptations can learn so much from them.

Part of the problem for them was that their future seemed so uncertain. Samuel had been a good judge, but he was getting old and his sons, who were to succeed him, were corrupt. It seems that, while Samuel was good as a prophet and judge, he was not so great as a father. He had allowed the prominent and powerful work of being Israel's leader to take his time and energy, and he had not been there to guide and teach his sons. When you realise that his own mentor, Eli, had made the same mistake, you wonder why he hadn't learned his lesson. So, in fear for their future, the people looked at the nations around them, rejected their trust in God's care for them, and begged for a king – which ultimately had disastrous consequences for them, just as Samuel predicted.

Inevitably, when, like Samuel, we go after position and the applause of people, we end up failing in the simpler, but more important things in our lives – relationships. Inevitably, when, like Israel, we allow our fear to lead us, we embrace the ways of those around us, instead of trusting God. Where is this happening in your life?

Do: The only way we can stop the destructive tendencies in our lives and reset course to a healthier way of living is through confession. As you go through today, confess any times when your desire for applause causes you to neglect what is most important, or when your fear leads you away from trusting God.

Pray: When my pride and fear lead me astray, O God, forgive and correct me.

TUESDAY 19 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Hebrews 6:13-20

Reflect: There is an amazing contrast in today's reading. On the one hand we are offered a picture of God in which God's greatness is such that the only name in which God can take an oath is God's own. It's a simple but powerful depiction of God's awesome greatness. There is no higher power, no higher authority, than God. But, on the other hand, God made an oath in order to bind God's self to a human being! This is the ultimate in humility and grace. This is a clear example of how God defines – and enacts – God's greatness.

The writer to the Hebrews then points out that this means that all who flee to God for refuge can have confidence in God and in God's hope. True greatness, which is always marked by humility and grace, is trustworthy – unlike the "greatness" which must dominate, conquer and control others. But God's trustworthiness goes even further. When we trust in God, we are drawn into God's inner sanctuary – into deep, intimate relationships with God. In other words, God binds God's self to us, just as God did to Abraham!

How can you "flee to God for refuge" today?

Do: We all have times when we need a safe place to hide and be restored. God has given us God's presence as such a safe place, and the gift of prayer of as the doorway to enter it. Today, whenever you feel overwhelmed or threatened, offer a quick prayer for God to sustain and protect you.

Pray: I flee to you for refuge, O God, because you have bound yourself to me.

WEDNESDAY 20 OCTOBER 2021

Read: John 13:1-17

Reflect: Jesus taught the disciples, in a number of different ways, what true greatness is in God's Reign. But nowhere was his message so powerfully enacted as in this reading from John's Gospel. As the disciples gathered for their final meal before Jesus' death, he took on the role of a slave. The job of washing feet was one of the lowest in any household, and here the greatest among

them was preparing to do it. No wonder Peter was so confused. At first, he was so offended that he (rather proudly) refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. Then, when Jesus explained that unless he was willing to be served, he had no part in Jesus, he went to the opposite extreme, asking Jesus to wash his whole body.

It's almost comical how hard Peter tries to be the greatest – the most devoted, the most "spiritual", the most obedient – even as Jesus willingly became the least. Where Peter was still competing with the other disciples, Jesus had released any need to compete. Where Peter was still trying desperately to prove himself, Jesus had nothing to prove.

But then Jesus held his act out as an example for the disciples to follow – which, after all the centuries, we still haven't learned to do. How can you embrace the call to be a servant to others in Jesus' name?

Do: We often point to people who serve others as somehow remarkable, but the truth is, all they have done is make a choice. Instead of seeking to be served, they have chosen the way of humility. Can you make this same choice today as you dedicate yourself to God's service?

Pray: Like you, Jesus, I seek not to be served but to serve.

THURSDAY 21 OCTOBER 2021

Read: 2 Kings 20:12-19

Reflect: Although Hezekiah was one of the few good kings of Judah, he was not immune to the temptations of his own pride. Although he had just experienced a deathly illness and a miraculous healing when visitors from the king of Babylon came, Hezekiah could not resist showing off his wealth. He took them on a tour of his palace and showed them his treasure and his military might. It was an act intended to impress these foreign visitors with his greatness, but it had unfortunate consequences. As Isaiah predicted, the time came when all the things that made Hezekiah's kingdom "great" would be carried off into Babylon. It took about a hundred years before the invasion finally came, but in the end Babylon conquered Judah, carried its people into exile, and claimed all of its treasure for

itself. It makes you wonder whether the wealth and greatness of Judah, which was surely reported back to the king of Babylon, became the stuff of legend around the Babylonian palace, perhaps even contributing to their desire to conquer this "great" nation.

This kind of pride so often trips us up. Whenever we try to show off, or prove ourselves to others, we inevitably end up with egg on our faces. But, as we will see on Sunday, God is in the business of restoration, and so, thankfully, when we return to humility, God's grace will always lift us up.

Are you guilty of any such shows of pride today?

Do: In our world it is common practice to show off our achievements through blatant displays of wealth and status. We constantly try to prove ourselves through what we wear and drive, and where we live. One of the best ways to resist this destructive pride is to give away what we would normally spend on excess or unnecessary indulgences. Make today a giving day.

Pray: In humility and recognition that all I have comes from you, O God, I share whatever I can with others.

FRIDAY 22 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Nehemiah 1:1-11

Reflect: Yesterday we read about Isaiah's prophecy that Jerusalem would be conquered by Babylon, and the people carried into exile. As we know, this was what happened. But the time came when the people were allowed to return to their homeland. It was an exciting time, but when the people arrived, they discovered that the land had been devastated. They now faced the tough task of rebuilding their broken nation.

Back in the palace of the Persian king (who had, by now, conquered Babylon) a man named Nehemiah was curious about the circumstances of his returned compatriots. When he heard that they were struggling, he was distraught, and began to make plans to get back to his homeland and help with the work. He began in prayer, recognising that God is in the business of restoration, and pleaded with God to give him favour with his king. This was because he had planned to ask for the king's permission to return to Jerusalem. Not

only did he receive permission, he also received gifts of building material from the king.

Nehemiah believed that God would restore his people, but this faith was not just a nice feeling or a good thought. It was expressed in faithful and compassionate action. He stepped up and got involved in doing something to alleviate the suffering of his people.

It's great to speak about God's salvation or God's provision and pray for God to restore those who are struggling. But, if that's all we do, we are not people of faith; we are people of religious fantasy. God has always looked for women and men through whom God could work to heal the world. Are you willing to be an agent of restoration today?

Do: Prayer is not bad, but it is not meant to be a way to escape our responsibility to be compassionate in action. Today, think about the things that you are praying for, and ask God if there's something God wants you to do. Then commit yourself to doing one thing today as an act of service in answer to your own prayers.

Pray: As I ask for your restoration, O God, I commit to being your instrument for bringing it about.

SATURDAY 23 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Mark 8:22-26

Reflect: Tomorrow we will read about the healing of a blind man in Jericho named Bartimaeus. Today, we read about a different blind man who is healed by Jesus. It doesn't take much to notice the differences in these two stories – one of which is that Jesus took two attempts to heal this man.

Immediately after this story, you'll find Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ, and then Peter's rebuke of Jesus for predicting Jesus's coming death. Peter had understood who Jesus was, but he still had to learn what it meant to be Messiah – death and resurrection. Like this blind man, Peter's eyes needed two steps to be fully opened. Mark uses this blind man's story to illustrate the journey from ignorance to understanding that the disciples went through.

God's restoration is often like this. We may think we know what is needed, and we may use our prayers to "instruct" God. When our prayers are not "answered" we may feel that God has failed us, or that we have failed. But, often, what we think will bring restoration won't, and we need time for our eyes to be opened to God's restoring work. Today, can you take time to listen and watch and allow God to open your eyes slowly to God's work in your life?

Do: The act of listening is both difficult and important. It's difficult because we like to feel that we're "right". But, when we are willing to let go of our need to be in control, we can start to listen and watch and learn new things about how God is working. Then we can experience God's restoration in ways we may not have expected. Try to watch and listen today.

Pray: I release my presumptions about your work, O God, and listen for the new thing you are doing.