

Sermon online on Sunday 25 July 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Treasure

'I am the greatest. I said that even before I knew I was.'
Immortal words from none other than the great Mohammed Ali; fly like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Behind the bravado and the wit, of course, he had a point. He was at one time the greatest heavyweight boxer alive, notching up no less than three world titles.

A few thousand years before Ali famously became a disciple of Islam, the disciples of Jesus were jostling for a similar title. Nothing to do with their prowess in the boxing ring, however, this time the title they were contesting was 'Greatest Disciple'.

'Some are born great; some achieve greatness and some,' as the saying goes, 'have greatness thrust upon them'. It's difficult to know which of those categories the disciples thought applied to them. They certainly weren't born into it; most of them were from very humble stock. None of them would have passed the strict religious scrutiny of the other rabbis, and since their surprise selection, their track record in courage, wisdom and sensitivity was, let's face it, abysmal. Any kudos was purely by association; they were only somebodies because of the Somebody they hung out with.

We're not told exactly what criteria they were judging themselves by, but one thing we can be sure of is that it wasn't humility. Judging by conversations recorded elsewhere, greatness for many of the disciples seemed to be about prestige, the best seats in the house; power-sharing with Jesus.

It's no surprise then, when mother of James and John comes grovelling to Jesus with a gut-wrenchingly embarrassing request. 'When you sit on your throne in your kingdom,' she pleads, 'give my boys the honour of being your right and left-hand men'.

Was this the ultimate pushy parent, or was mum just a pawn in her offsprings' power games? We don't know. What we do know is that when the other disciples get wind of this, understandably they aren't too pleased. And before long, they're all at it, jostling for position, flexing their superiority.

And it's all very human, isn't it?

No-one wants to be bottom of the pecking order (or, as my son would say, 'the food chain'). We all want to matter; we all want to be somebody to someone.

For Jesus, however, life was not a competition. His criteria for greatness were very different to that of his disciples. So, he responds to their squabbling by explaining that true greatness is actually measured in terms of service and sacrifice.

True greatness is not about stepping over others to get to the front of the queue. True greatness is about allowing

others that honour; putting others first, especially the little and the least; the undervalued and the powerless.

And we, the disciples of today, are each called to find our own ways of living out this greatness:

By speaking up for the voiceless through campaigning, petitions, through using our vote prayerfully.

By spending our money on what is sustainable.

By donating our time and cash to causes which redress imbalances of power.

By challenging prejudice when we meet it.

By calling out any religion or ideology that excludes or demonises others.

By refusing to collude with gossip which is so often about judgment and pecking order and delighting in a moral high-ground.

By choosing to give every person we encounter our full, undivided and affirming attention, particularly those less valued because of age or ability; pay grade or difference.

In short, by treating each person we meet as Christ before us; by following his example of service and sacrifice. Forget everything else, this is the stuff that can change worlds because great people inspire greatness in others.

Some of the greatest people I've met are those who are deeply interested in other people. Great people are at ease with themselves and with the world; they have nothing 'to protect and nothing to prove'. (Richard Rohr)

Whereas, yours truly spends too much of his life trying to prove something to himself and to others. Like you, perhaps, daily I live with the sin of comparison.

Jesus was no fool. He chose this motley crew of men and women because he saw within them potential. Using the language of Paul's letter, they were everyday, ordinary 'jars of clay' containing treasure only he could see.

Deliberately Jesus chose the ordinary, the powerless, the least in the eyes of the world, because he expressly wanted to prove that the treasure came from God.

And still today, he sees that treasure within you and within me... despite any evidence to the contrary. And he wants you and me to know and recognise that treasure too, and to use it for great things.

In *The Comfort Book*, his most recent collection of wisdom gathered from the bitter experience of depression, Matt Haig writes this:

'Your worth is you. Your worth is your presence. Your worth is right there. Your worth isn't something you earn. Your worth isn't something you buy. Your worth isn't something you gain through status or popularity or stomach crunches or having a really chic kitchen. Your worth is your existence. You were born with worth, as all babies are, and that worth doesn't simply disappear because you have grown a little older. You are a human, being. '

Just *being* you, the real you... is enough.

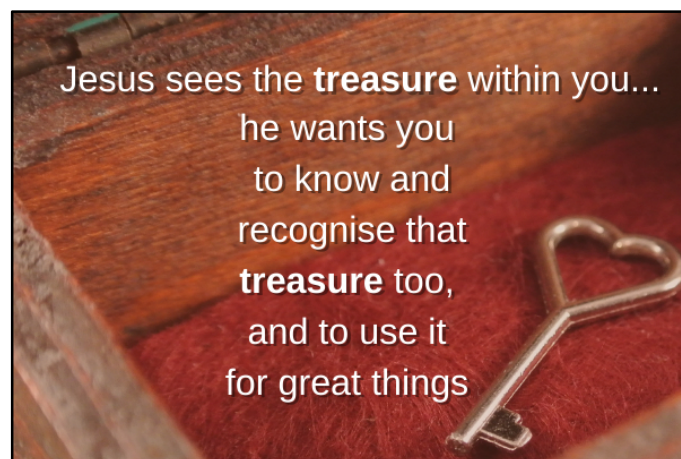
Any narrative within Christianity which says that you're born worthless and that any worth you have is only because

Jesus died for you, is a denial of the treasure you were born with, and a failure to see that the cross is not a contract with God to make us acceptable in his sight. We have always been acceptable. Scrap that - we've always been *treasured*. All that is necessary is that we accept that.

Because treasured people treasure others, just as great people make others great.

We are not dogs begging for crumbs from beneath God's table. We are not chewing gum on the soles of God's shoes. We are miracles; images of the divine; the very breath of God mixed with the dust of the earth. And, of course, we're flawed and driven by our appetites and ego. But, despite that, just as Jesus believed in the true greatness of those first disciples, he also believes in the disciple called you and the disciple called me.

I don't know about you, but that in itself is enough.



Matthew 20:20-28

²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

2 Corinthians 4

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken."^[b] Since we have that same spirit of^[c] faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that

the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.