

Sermon on Sunday 19 September 2021
by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship
Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

Is there anyone in the congregation here who knows of, or remembers, the comedian and entertainer Joyce Grenfell? You may not wish to admit that you do, of course, because she was at her prime in the 1940s and 50s. I only saw her towards the end of her career, honest!

She was famous for her roles in British comedy films such as the *Saint Trinian's* series and her appearances on the BBC TV show *What's My Line?* But she is best remembered for her comedy monologues, most famously posing as an infant school teacher. She would pretend to be addressing a class of five-year-old school children, dealing patiently with their foibles and distractions, and most often her sign-off line would be: "George, [PAUSE] *don't do that*".

You can imagine Jesus addressing his disciples in this morning's gospel in a similar way. They've been on the road together and when they get home, Christ asks: "*So boys, what were you talking about on the road? Would you like to share it with the rest of the class?*" He knows the answer, of course, but he wants to hear from them.

The disciples stand in a line and look at the floor and shuffle their feet. "*Oooh, it was nothing,*" they say, embarrassed. And then they admit that they were talking about who among them was the greatest. And you can imagine Jesus saying: "*Peter* [PAUSE] *don't do that*".

But Jesus doesn't leave it like that and walk off stage. Instead, he follows up with why Peter and others shouldn't discuss who is the greatest and he gives them a confusing instruction: "*To be first you have to be last*".

Jesus then embraces a child and says: "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me*", suggesting, it seems, at first, as if the role models for the Disciples should be children. To an extent, he is right. Christians should have certain childlike qualities - they should be trusting, loving, affectionate and forgiving.

I've read this passage many times and, when I worked for the Children's Society, we used the phrase '*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me*', as a slogan. Certainly it was part of our mission statement.

It's taken me a while to truly understand what Jesus meant and why he pulls a child towards him. In his day, children had a very low status in society, they were easily cast aside and they had no rights in law. What Jesus is saying is that, to be the greatest, you shouldn't be too proud to engage with the lowest tier of society. You should treat everyone as equal and that sometimes takes humility.

Jesus does not rebuke his disciples for displaying a need for self-esteem, because he knows that this is part of our humanity - to want to succeed, to be the best. What he says is that there are two kinds of greatness: there is the ambition to receive approval and applause from our fellow human beings, and there is the ambition to receive approval and acceptance from God. And you

can achieve both if you give the second ambition the top priority.

Many of us will admit to having enjoyed the taste of being recognised, being admired, savouring our 15 minutes of fame, being considered important within our own social circles. There's nothing wrong with that.

But Jesus points out that true greatness is never found there. The measure of true greatness is: "How many people can I serve? How can I help people? What can I give?"

If we look around, we can see God-pleasing greatness in the people in our lives. This is a favourite theme of mine. We can see God in people who work quietly on the fringes and in the background of our communities, for church, for social services, in shops and supermarkets; people who work for the NHS during a global pandemic; teachers; people who simply say hello to strangers because they are interested in other people because they are people.

And many more. You know who they are. It doesn't depend on their job, or their social status or their wealth. They are the people who put humility before pride.

Now I have to be say that this can be difficult in modern society, where we are constantly being told to be self-reliant, self-assured, have belief in ourselves to the point of arrogance. Our role models are on TV, on social media, in films and in the papers. No-one can afford to be a failure. And being humble is seen as being weak.

But it isn't.

I once worked as a hospital porter in a large accident-service hospital. As some of you may know, hospitals are very hierarchical places, with doctors, consultants and surgeons at the top, nursing staff below and porters at the bottom.

One day I was delegated to work in one of the operating theatres. In those days, some heart operations took many hours and on this occasion, after five hours, the surgeon in charge said to the team that he was going to take a break for an hour while he waited for some blood test results. He then turned to me, the lowest member of the crew, there to just fetch and carry things, and he said: "*Do you play tennis? Let's get out of here and have a quick game*". And so we did. Surgeon talks to porter. Unheard of. In my mind, he was the greatest.

You don't have to be famous or important to be a great Christian.

Amen

