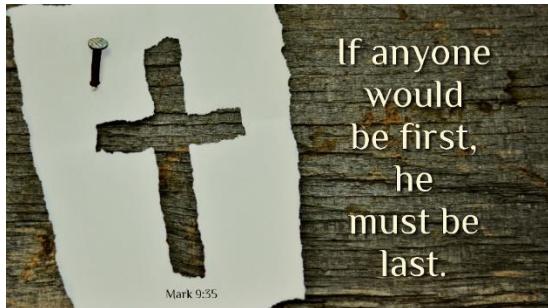


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 19th September 2021



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

Loving, gracious God, who does not put us in order – greatest to least, best to worst, loved most to loved least, or any other order: be with us as we spend time with one another and with you. Help us to listen to you as you speak to us and challenge us, love us and encourage us.

Lord God, you call us to live our best lives – for you, with you, in you. We may sometimes pause to smell the coffee or the roses, but we are often too busy to take time to be aware of you – that you are with us, in us, and in those around us. Quiet our hearts now to recognise you in this place today. Help us to reach out to one another with love, care and compassion, so that we can all live our best life for you. **Amen**

Lectionary Readings:

Jeremiah 11 v18-20 (p770) Plot Against Jeremiah

Psalm 54 (p575) Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.

James 3 v13 - 4 v3,7-8a (p1215) Two Kinds of Wisdom/Submit Yourselves to God

Mark 9 v30-37 (p1013) Who is the Greatest?

Jostling for Position

This week our focus explores what it means to be the greatest. In the passage from Mark's Gospel, there is both literal and metaphorical movement: the physical journey towards Jerusalem and the dawning understanding by Jesus' followers. Jesus disturbs his disciples by predicting his suffering and death. However, the disciples – whether through misunderstanding, or to avoid thinking about it – argue and jostle for position: which of them is the greatest? Calling them to order, Jesus explains that to be the greatest is to serve others. Jesus responds with talk about the first being last and the last, first. He drew a little child into the middle of the group, saying that welcoming a child was an example of welcoming him. How might this relate to us?

Jeremiah 11.18-20

The verses from Jeremiah 11 are the first of six poetic sections of the book known as Jeremiah's 'confessions'.

Jeremiah has caught wind of a plot against him. He attributes this discovery to God's protection, without which he would have been 'like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter'. The language mirrors that in Isaiah 53 v7, the song of the suffering servant; the theme is very similar. But Jeremiah also sees this potential attack on his person as an affirmation of his prophetic ministry. He calls for God to respond with retribution on his opponents. To us that may seem an inappropriate thing to ask, but really it is a cry for divine justice to be exercised, coupled with an assertion of confidence that what he has been proclaiming against his

own community is true prophecy. The prophet has no doubts: God's commission must be carried out, and if that means personal suffering, so be it.

The psalms, in general, reflect the Jewish tradition of an ongoing dialogue between the people of God, creation and God. In Psalm 54, we hear a cry for help to God in the middle of a difficult time, but also the psalmist's confidence that the Lord will not abandon them.

The Letter of James has had an uneasy history in the Bible. Martin Luther thought it should be left out because it made only a few limited references to Jesus and seemed to emphasise what we must do and not what God had done for us, and the importance of faith. The writer begins the passage speaking about wisdom and the internal jostling that takes place between earthly and God-given wisdom. The result is the clash of conflicting desires. The writer's response is to remind us of the need to rely on God in every aspect of life. In this passage, what is done matters, but what is done will be the result of how close we are willing to get to God.

The passage from Mark 9 begins: 'They left that place ...' (v30). There is movement both literally (the journey to Jerusalem) and metaphorical (the dawning understanding of Jesus' followers as the journey to Jerusalem continues to unfold). Two events dominate the passage. First, there is the evident discomfort of the disciples to Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection. This is the second such prediction made by Jesus. On the first occasion, Peter tried to reason with Jesus and was firmly put in his place (8 v31-33). This time the response, after an initial sullen silence (v32 'But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.'), is followed by the disciples – led by James and John – jostling for position, wanting to be acknowledged as the greatest. It reads rather like children bickering over who gets or deserves the biggest piece of cake! One of the themes of Mark's Gospel is the repeated failure of the disciples to understand what Jesus said or did. How often do we plough

on, hoping things will work out rather than admitting our limitations and taking advice?

In the second event, later the same day (v33), Jesus responds to the earlier bickering with an enacted parable of a powerless and (in terms of the prevailing culture) insignificant child (v36-37). In the modern world, influencers are powerful because they shape the spending habits of people who aspire to be important or simply 'on trend'. Here, Jesus challenges the understanding that greatness means being important or 'on trend'. The word 'servant' (v35) is probably better translated as 'slave' – although for modern ears this is extremely problematic. We must remember that in Jesus' world, slaves were common and accepted as normal. Furthermore, slaves were universal and no one particular race was more likely than any other to be enslaved. A slave was someone who belonged to a master, whose role was to reflect the greatness of his owner in all that he or she did. For Jesus, greatness is not about climbing to the top of the pile. For Jesus, greatness exists in the rightness of our relationships – starting with our relationship with God.

A Sending Out Prayer

Thank you, Lord, that we can always find our place in you.

Thank you that we belong to you,
and no one can take that away from us.

We are secure in your loving arms.

We need never be afraid to ask you anything.

Thank you for the people who give us a cup of water,
and much more, because we belong to you.

Thank you for the times we can meet blessing with blessing.
Lord, Jesus, may we go out into the world to shine with your love,
listen with your ears
and speak words of kindness and hope
to everyone we meet – in your name.

Amen.