

*Who is the Greatest?*  
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Last week I noted that in the first half the Gospel of Mark, Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God. His teaching and his mighty deeds lead people to ask, “Who is this man who acts and speaks with such authority?” The answer to this question comes with Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ. But although Peter confesses who Jesus is, Peter refuses to accept what Jesus must do: be rejected, suffer, and die. And so in the second half of the Gospel, Jesus begins to teach his disciples what it means to follow him in the way of discipleship.

A certain pattern begins to emerge in second half of the Gospel. First, Jesus speaks of the suffering and rejection that lies before him. Second, the disciples do not understand why Jesus must suffer. Third, Jesus begins to teach them anew the cost of discipleship.

In today’s Gospel, for example, Jesus teaches the disciples that he will be handed over to death, but the disciples do not understand what he is saying, and instead of asking Jesus what he means, they argue about who is the greatest. Jesus talks about suffering and death, but they argue about greatness and self-importance. They hear Jesus words, but they do not understand them. They see Jesus’ mighty deeds, but they do not perceive their meaning.

And so Jesus teaches them that the greatest in the kingdom of God are those who serve the needs of others. In the kingdom of God, receiving a child is more important than receiving the greatest dignitary. In the kingdom of God there will be no arguing about greatness because the greatest will be too busy serving the needs of others.

Reading the Gospel of Mark is like taking a cold outside shower in the middle of January. It shatters our illusions about ourselves and about God. It challenges us to hear what we don’t want to hear, to see what we don’t want to see. It threatens us with a reversal of fortunes that will turn our world upside own.

The Gospel reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways. The gospel challenges us to see how God acts through suffering, death, and the scandal of the cross. The Gospel presents us with a vision of discipleship that makes us different from the world around us. The Gospel reminds us that following Christ requires a new set of values whereby greatness is measured by service to others rather than by achievement and success.

But this is a hard lesson that we must learn over and over again. This is a hard lesson because we want to be like everyone else. This is a hard lesson because we want to be recognized as successful and important. This is a hard lesson because we want the most prominent place in the kingdom. This is a hard lesson because we don’t want anything to do with suffering.

What will it take to renew contemporary Catholicism in this difficult period of the Church's life? The answer of today's Gospel is this: *If we are to renew contemporary Catholicism, we need to live in a way that presents the world with a vision of what it means to live in the kingdom of God.* If we can find a way to do this, others will follow. If we can find a way to do this, others will come. But to do this, we must imitate the Lord who did not come to be served but to serve and to give life as ransom for many.

Every week I end my homily by reminding you that we are about to enter into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, and so we are. But this week I leave you with a task that can help you understand what it means to be a disciple. The task is simple. It will take you an hour and a half: Read the Gospel of Mark from start to finish without interruption. As you read the first half of the Gospel, notice that everybody, including the disciples, misunderstands who Jesus is because they are focused on the wrong things. Then as you read the second half of the Gospel, pay attention to what Jesus teaches about discipleship. If you do this, you will begin to understand what it means to be a disciple. You will begin to understand how we can renew contemporary Catholicism by renewing ourselves. And if you are so inclined, send me a copy of your reflections. I will try to work them into a future homily.