

Jesus – an Exception in the Life of God?

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*The Son of Man came not to serve but to be served and give his life as an example to many
(with apologies to Mark 10:45)*

Nowhere is such a reading of Mark 10:45 attested, but, on the other hand, it is widely attested in the lived experience of the church. Did Jesus not come seeking followers who might worship him? Is this not what makes him like God? Or is he different from God or an exception to the way God is? What is God's way?

Such questions underlie an issue which the author of the Gospel according to Mark addresses in Mark 8 – 10. The version of the saying attested in the manuscripts reads very differently from the one above:

*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many
(authentically Mark 10:45)*

This statement comes as the climax of Jesus' conflicts with his disciples which begin back in Mark 8. There Jesus asked them, who people were saying that he was (8:27). Having heard their reports, that people were saying he was John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets, Jesus asked them what they thought. Peter replied: "You are the Christ (the Messiah)" (8:29). He was surely right. Indeed, this is the first occasion where the disciples hail him as the Messiah in Mark's gospel.

Such a declaration was, however, dangerous. Thus, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone (8:30). It was dangerous because most people expected the Messiah to be someone who would lead the nation to freedom, defeat their enemies, and as king of the Jews successfully establish God's kingdom. It was revolutionary and to announce that Jesus was the Messiah publicly would put him in danger. The Roman authorities had no tolerance for subversive movements and their would-be Messiahs, whether they planned their battles by force of arms or by force of ideas. Indeed, they would crucify Jesus, too, when the secret got out, to deter such aspirations, mounting the charge over him as "King of the Jews".

Jesus adds to his warning the statement that he would face suffering and rejection by the authorities, and would be executed, before rising from the dead (8:31). This upsets Peter whose understanding of messiahship was that Jesus would be triumphant and successful, as most people expected a Messiah to be. He even starts to challenge Jesus and the exchange becomes quite sharp (8:32-33). Jesus calls him Satan and declares that he has his mind on human values not on God's values. This will have puzzled Peter, because for him to be on God's side was to be on the winning side. Jesus and Peter have very different ideas about God and God's ways.

Next, Jesus gives the disciples instructions about what it means to follow him (8:34-37). It means not to make oneself the centre of everything, but to give up selfish ambition and even be prepared to take up the cross. The human values which Peter was advocating meant trying to be a winner. Jesus puts it in terms typical of his confronting style: What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world and lose their soul, their real being?

For Peter to be on God's side meant to win and to gain power and wealth – to be great. Jesus advocated a very different understanding of greatness and what is profitable. Greatness in Jesus' understanding is not making yourself the centre of attention and true profit is not gaining wealth and power, but being prepared to be lowly and loving. That was his way and that was to be the way of his disciples.

In the next chapter we again find Jesus confronting his disciples. Again, he repeats that he is on a road that will bring suffering and death (9:31), but then learns that they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest (9:33-34). He subverts their values with the statement: "If anyone wants to be first, he will need to be last and servant of all" (9:35). Then he takes a little child, weak and vulnerable, as his model. The assumption is that the little child has not yet learned to try to play the games of power. That is the way Jesus is and that is the way they are to be. Can they accept and value such a little child and value being like a little child? Then they could accept and value Jesus and indeed, God, because neither of them plays the power game.

A third time we find the disciples in conflict with Jesus. This comes in Mark 10 where James and John approach Jesus wanting the top two positions of power in what they hoped would be Jesus' victorious kingdom as the Messiah (10:35-40), despite his repeating for a third time that his path would lead him to suffering and death (10:33-34). They have failed to understand Jesus' teaching and what it means to follow him. Their approach annoys the other disciples (10:41), probably because they might have wanted such power, too.

Jesus' response to the disciples expands his teaching (10:40-45). He points to the way rulers of this world like to have power and dominate people. They see that as their greatness. Again, he repeats his message: if you want to be great, you need to learn to be a servant, a carer. In very confronting language he subverts normal values, declaring that to be truly great is even to be a slave. It is then that he brings the statement with which our discussion began:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many (10:45)

While Mark brings this teaching especially in Mark 8 – 10, he continues it in the story of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem and his crucifixion. He truly is the Messiah, but a very different kind of Messiah. His throne is a cross. His crown is a crown of thorns. Love and lowliness even to the point of death are the way of Jesus and according to his teaching this is true greatness and also how the disciples should understand themselves.

These are what he declares are also God's values, which Peter failed to see, which had led to Jesus' rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on God's priorities but on human priorities". This then becomes difficult. Is God like Jesus in this regard? Or is God different?

Jesus pointed to human models of greatness as represented by rulers and kings (10:42). Popular understandings of God with a long history have pictured God as at least like great human beings, such as rulers and kings and concluded that God is the king, the ruler of the universe and God's greatness is God's power and might, like that of a great king. Isn't God more like what the disciples understand as great?

Such images of God do, indeed, reflect the disciples' notion of greatness. Indeed, taken to an extreme this notion can lead to images of God as not loving and generous but rather as primarily wanting to be treated like earth's kings: glorified, worshipped, praised, for his own sake. At times God is pictured as being very self-obsessed, wanting the universe to revolve around himself, just like people who want to be self-important.

If God is really like that, then we would have to imagine that Jesus was teaching that there is a big difference between him and God and certainly us and God. Imagined in this way, we would have to imagine that God demands that both Jesus and his disciples as loyal subjects must be obedient. That would mean that they must not try to be powerful and great like God, but do the opposite: be kind and loving – because that is what God demands. They are not to be like God at all.

This is not, however, how Jesus talks about God. He speaks of God as king, but a very different kind of king. The kingdom or reign of God is about love and generosity. Jesus did not see himself as an exception to the way God is, but in touch with and expressing God's being. Jesus was not an exception in the life of God. Rather they were on the same page. Jesus reveals what God is like.

When in the parable of the prodigal son Jesus talks about a father running down the road to welcome back a son who had messed up his life, he was talking about himself, but he was also talking about God. Rather than seeing God as like the rulers and kings of this world, self-centred, and great in Peter's sense, Jesus shows us God as generous and caring and using his might and power to that end. Peter's understanding of greatness, including, by implication, God's greatness is all too human in the worst sense. Jesus' image of God is also human or humane, but in the best sense. Love is his model.

Just as faith must subvert popular notions of God's greatness based on all too human models of greatness, so faith needs to subvert popular notions of worship which are based on such models. True worship is, therefore, not the admiration of power, but the awe before the one who is almighty but who uses that power to create and redeem. God is not a self-obsessed ruler, nor like a two-year old bent on attention, but loving and generous, confronting our models of greatness with the subversiveness of Jesus.

This can all come undone, however, when we think about Easter, especially if we interpret the resurrection as Jesus finally fulfilling Peter's dreams of achieving greatness and glory and leaving love and lowliness behind. Where human notions of God's greatness follow Peter's model, then resurrection comes to be seen as a reversal of what Jesus was. His love and lowliness would be then just a passing phase. Now everything is back to normal. Jesus is enthroned – just like the great kings and rulers of this world, but in the heavenly realm. All he stood for is undone or rendered little more than a stunt or an interim phase. Peter and the disciples were right after all. Only their timing was wrong.

Easter, however, is not to be seen as God saying no to Jesus, but as God saying, yes. Rather than now turning his back on Jesus' model, God affirms it and him. We then understand the resurrection as an act of vindication. God says, yes, to all that Jesus was and what he taught and embodied. His life was not an exception in the life of God, but expressed God's heart. He was and is the Word, the revelation of who God was and is. Indeed, faith celebrates Jesus as the Son, as God incarnate.

It is very troubling that over the centuries the view of the disciples, as Mark portrays it, has been so influential. To hail God in their terms is, in turn, to reinforce the values that having power and wealth is justified and is what makes for greatness. Worship, framed in this way, can subvert the gospel of Jesus, turning him into a model for the pursuit of human greatness. Indeed, it is as though Mark wrote: "The Son of Man did not come to serve but to be served and to give his life as an example for many". Many have followed that example.

When Paul wrote of such teachings, he spoke of what in human terms appeared to be God's foolishness and weakness and declared that it is true wisdom and strength (1 Cor 1:18-25). It is, especially Paul who unpacks what makes this subversive message work. For it is in opening ourselves to God's generosity, to forgiveness and acceptance, that we become free from preoccupation with ourselves and concern with our own status. We are able then to have space and energy to respond to others in love, to love our neighbours **as and** because we love ourselves. Love creates love.

Paul talks of this as the work of the Spirit, first bringing to us the love which sets us right with God and with ourselves and then producing through us the fruits of the Spirit, especially love. Paul celebrates this love in his famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13.

The traditions of the church have been so shaped by models of greatness drawn from the practices and values of royal courts, that it is a constant challenge to hold onto the subversive teaching of Jesus. The disciples so easily win.

What is greatness? Paul would answer: love. Where do we see true spirituality, the true marks of the Spirit? In love. Why is this so? Because God is love. Can we still speak of God in royal terms as king? Yes, if we remember that he is the king of love. Are acts and words of worship and adoration appropriate in relation to God? Yes, if our awe responds to God's being as all loving and not as a god who is the projection of human obsession with power and self-centredness.

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