

Mark 10.35-45

Value 1: All Involved

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 12 June 2022

Big Church, Little Church [1]

Series Introduction

I wonder what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘church’? Perhaps you think of a huge vaulted ceiling with stained-glass windows, an organ swelling, and a choir singing? Perhaps you think of a village church without heating on a cold winter’s night, waiting for the service to end so you can go home and get warm?

Perhaps you think of church structures and PCC meetings and rotas and constant calls for volunteers to do this or that.

Or perhaps you don’t think of an organisation at all but people – good and bad. Some of the worst experiences of my life have been at the hands of sisters and brothers in Christ – and some of the best have been with and surrounded by my sisters and brothers in Christ. That shouldn’t surprise us – churches aren’t made up of perfect people, but the sick looking to Jesus for healing.

In the New Testament there isn't a word for church, at least not like ours – instead it talks about a 'gathering' or 'congregation'. So really a 'church' is what happens when 'Resurrection People' gather together with Jesus at the centre. A 'church' is a group of disciples of Jesus, gathered to worship God, to receive the Spirit together, to love and support one another, to learn from the Scriptures together, to encourage one another to live holy lives.

And that means size doesn't matter. Church can be big, church can be little – **what matters is not the size but the centre.**

Over the next five weeks Chris and I will be preaching through five church values, to help us keep Jesus at the centre:

1. All Involved
2. Becoming Disciples
3. Doing Evangelism
4. Creating Community
5. Encountering God

Big Church – all of us gathered together – needs to do those things. But actually most of them work best in Little Church, when we gather in smaller groups. **What matters is not the size but the centre** – and that centre must be Jesus.

As we look through those five values, I'd like us to have in mind Paul's words to the Christians in Thessalonica. Like you they were great, full of love for one another, doing their best to follow Jesus. So when he wanted to encourage them to keep pressing on in their faith he put it like this:

Brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.

1 Thessalonians 4.1, 9-10 (NIV)

Paul tells them: (1) keep following God's instructions, his best way of life; (2) keep loving one another as God does. You *are* doing these things, he says: now do them *more* and more, keep it up – and that's my prayer for this series. Let us live to please God **more and more**, let us love one another **more and more**.

And let us do that in Big Church and in Little Church, for **what matters is not the size but the centre**.

I want never gets

My Mum used to say to me, 'I want never gets'. She was trying to teach me to ask rather than demand.

I wonder if James and John learned that lesson after this episode. They sidled up to Jesus and said (35), **'We want you to do for us whatever we ask.'** They *said* 'ask' but it doesn't sound much like a question to me.

But look at how Jesus responds to them. The gospels aren't shy of showing us Jesus' anger – perhaps a lesson for us when *we* shy away of talking about God's anger or wrath. But here, Jesus is *not* angry. He responds gently, not to their demand but to their naivety, their excitement, their desire to be close to the action.

'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked (36). Let's sit with that question for a bit. I have a series brewing on 'questions God asks' – and this is one of them. **'What do you want me to do for you?'** How would you answer that? What do you want Jesus to do for you? He doesn't always give us what we want, but he always asks, he always listens, and he's always with us.

They replied (37), **'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.'**

They didn't want to miss out on the good stuff! They wanted to be there, to have the best seats in the house when Jesus did his thing, when his glory was displayed for all to see.

The problem was, like when Peter told Jesus off for saying he was going to die, their thoughts were oh-so-human. **'You don't know what you're asking,'** Jesus told them (38). They thought Jesus' **glory** would be the glory of a all-conquering king, the majesty of an emperor, the victory of a fierce warrior.

But when Jesus entered *his glory*, who were on his right and left? Two criminals, hanging on the crosses either side of him. *They* were those for whom the **places** had **been prepared** (40).

Jesus turned their demand into a teachable moment. James and John – and the other **ten** disciples who got pretty cross (41) – didn't get that God's kingdom values are different to the world's values. In fact they are upside-down (or rather, the right way up).

The moment of Jesus' worldly shame – dying naked on a Roman cross – was the moment of his heavenly glory. Why? Because it showed his obedience and faithfulness to the Father, even unto death. In God's kingdom what matters is not how much authority you have or don't have, but how you serve.

Listen to what Jesus taught his disciples (42):

‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Mark 10.42-45 (NIV)

God’s kingdom turns the world’s values upside-down – or rather, the right way up. Jesus embodied that in his own life, and told us to do the same. In God’s kingdom greatness is found not in high office or in authority, but in service, in faithfulness, in obedience. Jesus gently turned his disciples’ wrong-headed thinking into a teachable moment – it’s a simple lesson, but one we disciples of Jesus have to learn again and again. Unfortunately the world’s values subtly infect the church and our attitudes so we don’t always realise, and we still value power and authority over service. That’s why sometimes we can give some people or gifts higher priority or value than others.

The right way up: people

Now, imagine Jesus employed a firm of management consultants to help him choose his disciples.

To: Jesus, son of Joseph, Carpenter's Shop, Nazareth

Dear sir,

Thank you for submitting the CVs and references for the twelve men you have picked for management positions in your new organisation. We have done due diligence, analysed personality profiles, and identified their key transferable skills. It is our opinion that most of your nominees lack the necessary background, education, and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable. Andrew prefers to sit in the background. James and John the sons of Zebedee place personal interests before company loyalty. Thomas shows a questioning attitude that undermines morale. Matthew is blacklisted for financial irregularities. James and Thaddaeus are political radicals.

We recommend you look for other persons with more appropriate experience, skills, and proven capability.

Only one candidate has potential, demonstrating both ability and resourcefulness, with a keen business mind. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and has contacts in high places. We commend Judas Iscariot as your right-hand man and suggest you use him to help appoint the others in your team.

We wish you every success in your new venture.

Based on letter from Phil Potter, The Challenge of Cell Church, p.44.

Thank goodness Jesus didn't – and *doesn't* – choose his followers by the world's criteria. He turns the world's values upside-down – or rather, the right way up. And in so doing he shows there's a place in his kingdom for you, and for me.

Jesus did not come for the finished article, but for failures, drop-outs, raw material for him to work with.¹ He highlighted hated tax-collectors and adulterers to show that God's transforming power and grace is for all. In the Living Bible 2 Corinthians 12.9 goes like this: **My strength shows up best in weak people.**²

One writer puts it like this: **God delights in taking undervalued, unconfident and seemingly untalented people, and turning them into effective ministers.**³ It doesn't matter who you are – or who you *aren't* – all God needs to use you is a willing heart.

Whether we are highly educated like Paul, or not at all educated like Peter, all God asks is a heart willing **to serve** like Jesus (45). That's what he values. I hope we nurture and encourage *everyone* with a heart of service to get involved, more and more.

The right way up: perspective

Jess loves to go snorkelling. We have in the past picked places to visit because they are supposed to have lots of interesting things to see underwater.

I however am useless at snorkelling. I can't figure out why but I just can't do it. I end up with a mouth full of seawater, coughing and spluttering on the surface . We ended up buying me a face mask so I can at least look under the surface and see what she sees – for as long as I can hold my breath.

But that's when I learned what I should have realised would end up in a sermon one day: under the surface the sea is *teeming* with life! From the surface you can see maybe one or two large fish. But look underneath and there are countless creatures swimming in groups, swimming alone, hiding under rocks, buried in the sand, walking across the bottom

Churches are like that. Some of the gifts God gives are obvious – but most are hidden, beneath the surface. The world stays up top, seeing and valuing only the most obvious gifts. But God sees *everything*, he sees the sea teeming with life beneath the surface.

Most of us could identify the people in our church with the most obvious gifts – probably because they stand here week after week. They are good and valuable. But every bit as good and every bit as valuable are the *hidden* gifts, those things *beneath* the surface.

Little Church is an ideal place for those to be discovered. As we grow together and get to know one another in little settings – maybe like a home group – we dive beneath the surface to see the life God has put there. Yet again it's all upside-down – or rather, the right way up. Most of the life in the ocean isn't found in the few big, obvious things – but in the countless billions of creatures you can only see by looking below the surface.

We need to change our perspective to be upside down – or rather, the right way up: to look beneath the surface, to see things as God sees them, and to value all the gifts he has given his people.

The right way up: priorities

Imagine walking by a lake when suddenly you hear screams and see someone drowning. You dive in, swim across the lake and grab the person. But now, ask yourself which part of the body was the most important in performing the rescue. Was it the ear that heard the cry? Or was it the eye that saw the person drowning? Or could it be the legs that ran towards the lake or the arms that swam or the hand that reached out?⁴

It's all of them, *together*, of course. In the kingdom of God there is no greasy pole to climb, there is a body made up of different and equal parts, all working together for the common good. The head of the body is not the church leader, but Jesus.

For example, where do cleaning the toilets and leading a service come in the pecking order of ministry? To be honest, if the toilets were never cleaned, after a few months I don't think any of you would care or even notice who was leading the service.

I want us to prioritise what matters to God: obedience to the Father, faithfulness like Jesus, and a willing heart inspired and enabled by the Spirit to serve others. Then our values will be upside-down – or rather, the right way up.

Claiming the unclaimed

When you fly somewhere, after you go through passport control you make your way to the baggage reclaim area. There you find several conveyor belts where the staff put the luggage and it goes round and round until someone claims it.

The mad thing is there are almost *always* half a dozen bags left from a previous flight. I mean... did those people *forget* they had some luggage to collect?

Far too often – and I am guilty of this myself – church leadership teams come up with a Great Idea, and then put out a call for volunteers to go on a rota to help deliver it.

But to me that feels like leaving the airport without collecting your luggage. The better way round is to collect the luggage and *then* head off. That means looking at *everyone*, even the unlikely people, looking *beneath* the surface for hidden gifts, uncovering and valuing *everyone* and *all* gifts and acts of service – and then encouraging each other to do those things more and more.

Then the things a church does matches the people gathered together, rather than shoehorning the people into someone else's idea of what they should be doing.

That's really what it means for everyone to be involved: disciples' of Jesus gathering together, and identifying what he's given us so together we can live God's best life more and more. That needs to happen in Big Church *and* in Little Church – because what matters is not the size but the centre.

So I wonder – what has God put in your heart, what gifts do you have, what is he calling and equipping you to do – however little or big? What encouragement, what opportunity do you need to share that with the rest of us? I'd love us to discover all that – and actually those conversations work far better in Little Church, because in Big Church most voices get lost.

Friends, let's make sure we value *all* people and *all* gifts – however Big or Little, obvious or hidden – so we can *all* be involved. Let's make sure our values are turned upside-down – or rather, the right way up. And let's learn the truth that what matters is not the size but the centre – and that's Big Church Little Church.

¹ Phil Potter, *The challenge of cell church*, 45.

² Potter, 45.

³ Potter, 46.

⁴ Potter, 48.