

In recent weeks, there has been some controversy over Archbishop Justin Welby's intervention on the political scene. As a member of the Commission on Economic Justice, he was endorsing their report *Prosperity and Justice*. In essence, it was recommending that if we wish to create a just and caring society, we must be prepared to pay for it. In fairness, that meant those who had been ducking their responsibilities and those with deeper pockets must be prepared to shoulder more of the burden. I guess that takes us into the realm of party politics where many people start to feel uncomfortable and there is nothing new about that reaction.

One critic on the General Synod, suggested that the Archbishop should not be alienating voters from one section of the political spectrum, but be focusing on Christ and the message of salvation. I view that as a most unfair criticism. Notwithstanding the fact of it being unusual for the Archbishop not to mention Jesus Christ in any of his addresses, he clearly upholds a widely held view that the message of salvation encompasses God's kingdom here on earth – 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. That earthly kingdom is indeed a troubled place – in our local communities, in our nation and across the world.

In my lifetime, which now spans many decades, I cannot recall a time when there was so much distrust of the political leadership and the various institutions of state. I come from a very diverse parish, where about one third of the residents are high on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. But the unease I hear at say our local foodbank is shared by those I meet from wealthier areas of the parish. The specific concerns might be different, but that sense of fear and uncertainty is widespread. Right across the world, trust in the political establishment is coming under scrutiny. People are turning to extremists and celebrities, often reliant on distortions of the truth. Surely, Jesus and his church should have something to say about the complex issues facing the world.

Jesus would have been well aware of the oppressive regime under which the Palestinians suffered. It would be true to say he never directly criticised those secular authorities. But he was acutely aware of the human attitudes, motivations and behaviour that underpinned the corruption of that empire. In the gospel, we heard how Jesus took his disciples aside and once again attempted to tell them of the most significant event in the journey of humankind – his forthcoming passion and resurrection. The disciples were more concerned about who would be the greatest amongst them. For them, success came in those human terms of fulfilled personal ambition and elevation.

So, the disciples' response should come to us as no surprise. Jesus is telling them that his life will be fulfilled through his rejection, torture and death. It is hard for anyone to comprehend how that can reveal the true greatness of God. It is of course good to have goals in life and satisfying right to celebrate our success in fulfilling them. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that human trait of ambition. Ambition is often what drives human progress. Behind every seemingly impossible achievement, you will usually find an

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implacable human being. But, as with most good things in life, there is always a downside. Personal ambition can get out of hand. It can become so relentless that everything else is forgotten in the pursuit of success. You only have to glance at the news to hear of the impact of selfish ambition and I am sure we have all encountered it in everyday life.

James, in addressing his early Christian community, also talks of ambitions springing from envy and selfishness. These are the characteristics that threaten the unity of that community, creating conflicts and opening up divisions. Just as now, much of the disorder and evil James encountered was rooted in greed and selfishness. People do not usually become ruthless entrepreneurs, deceitful financiers or corrupt politicians if there is nothing in it for them!

Jesus offers the disciples a lesson in the meaning of true greatness, using the example of a child to make his point. Jesus says that true greatness is not found in being the masters of others but rather in being their servant. That does not mean just serving the great and good who can offer rich rewards, but serving the weaker members of the community. In place of the ambition to rule and control, Jesus substituted the ambition to serve others. Through his own example, Jesus showed that service rendered to the least is the best service of all. That kind of service is the greatest because it comes with no immediate reward. Although Jesus had authority from God, he never used it to dominate others. He used his authority to serve others, especially the weaker and marginalised members of the community.

We are called to follow Jesus' example in our lives. When we set ourselves goals, we have to ensure there is more to them than serving our own self-interests. We have to be sure that what we are doing is impartially serving others and building up the community. We must be prepared to make a fair contribution to our community. We also have to accept that, from a selfish point of view, the path that emerges is not always the one we would have chosen and might even have undesirable consequences. Just as Jeremiah lamented the cost of doing God's will, so might we find following a life of service something of a burden.

That is the point that Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples. The Christian life does involve sacrifices and challenges. What we do as individuals can really make a difference – caring for each other, being active in the church community, standing up for Christian values in our nation and doing the best for the planet. All of these things probably involve giving up some time or money we would rather spend elsewhere. They might also mean taking a closer look at what we buy and where we buy it, where we borrow or invest and even how we vote. Our actions might even provoke ridicule from friends and colleagues.

Following the Christian life takes time and effort. Keeping to that path is something we can never achieve on our own. There might be set-backs on the way but take heart from the disciples: However much they failed in their understanding or mission, however much they quarrelled amongst themselves and made mistakes, Jesus remained as faithful to them as he does to us. Those early apostles, men and women, went on to found the Church we know

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today. However confused and powerless we might feel about national and world events, we are right to speak out and show that a few people can still make a lot of difference.