



**Leadership Ethics –
Spiritual Discipline
Sermon – Rod Harding
12 March 2023**

Isaiah 58:3-9(a)

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 20:17-28

A couple of weeks ago, in the 10am service, we watched a replay of the first Winter Olympics gold medal ever won by an Australian. It was the 1000m short-track speed skating final at the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Games, and it was won in spectacular fashion by our own Stephen Bradbury who, as you remember, was strategically skating behind the main field when all those involved in the close battle for the title crashed out and he was able to skate through to an unlikely victory. The race has become part of the folklore of Australian sport and people now speak of ‘doing a Bradbury’.

But it seems that ‘doing a Bradbury’ is actually a very appropriate thing to do – at least, Jesus clearly thought so! Not that he used those words, of course –but he did say, at both ends of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, which Steve preached on last sermon,

“The last will be first and the first will be last.”

(Matt 19:30 & 20:16)

That saying clearly relates directly to the parable where workers are hired at 6am, 9am, noon, 3pm and 5pm, and they all receive the same pay, regardless of the time they worked. But I want to suggest today that that statement actually underlies almost all that we have been reading from Matthew in this series, and may well be the ‘short answer’ to all the questions we’ve been asking about ‘Ethics and Encounters’.

Way back in chapter 16 of Matthew’s gospel, we read,

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (16:21)

Peter immediately objects, so Jesus then tells the disciples,

“Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” (16:25)

Does that sound anything like the idea of the first being last and the last first? It would appear to become the theme that underlies Jesus’ teaching all through this journey to Jerusalem, which begins in Galilee – perhaps because it is uppermost in his own mind, as Jesus himself, the King of his kingdom, is on his way to submit to the cruel death of a common criminal.

Only a week later, in chapter 17, he says it again –

*When they came together in Galilee, he said to them,
“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.
They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.”
(17:22-23)*

His own imminent future seems to be very much in the centre of his thinking.

When we turn to chapter 18, in the passage immediately before we started this series (Matt 18:1-9), Jesus is in Capernaum, where his disciples ask him,

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Jesus calls a small child, and says to his disciples,

“Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Do you hear the undertones of ‘last and first’? The parable of the lost sheep then places significance on the *last* sheep – the missing one, who is treated as more important than the other ninety-nine. This theme is then followed through into instructions on how to deal with conflict and a parable on the nature and importance of forgiveness. All through this, Jesus is consistently recommending that *others* are where our focus must be, not on *ourselves* – again, the ‘first and last’ theme is still present.

In chapter 19, by now journeying south down the east bank of the Jordan, Jesus is questioned about marriage and divorce. When he comes to the end of that conversation, although the preacher didn't focus on it on the day, once again Jesus is surrounded by children, about whom he says,

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (19:14)

That is, those who are regarded as ‘last’ in social significance are first in the kingdom of heaven! Matthew's account then goes on immediately to the conversation with the rich young ruler, where Jesus tells him,

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” (19:21)

...which leads to a conversation about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus affirms that while material wealth and the social status that accompanies it, are the most important things in a person's life and experience, that desire to be ‘first’ (in a worldly sense) will cause them to be last (in a spiritual sense) – and that is exactly where the chapter ends, with Jesus stating,

“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” (19:30)

Chapter 20 then begins with the parable of the landowner who hires labourers to work in his vineyard and pays them all the same amount, last to first, concluding the parable with the by now familiar statement,

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (20:16)

And so we come to today's passage, starting at verse 17 of chapter 20, and we are reminded again of the context in which all these conversations have taken place. It began in Caesarea Philippi, with the first prediction of his death and resurrection, then moved to Galilee for the second. Here in chapter 20, we find the third prediction and, by this time, the journey is almost complete, as Jesus will be arriving in Jerusalem at the beginning of the next chapter.

At this point, he and the disciples are somewhere near Jericho, about 20 kilometres northeast of Jerusalem, and probably just one day's walk away. So again, Jesus...

...took the Twelve aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"" (20:17-19)

This third prediction of his death is by far the most detailed – whatever may have been vague in the earlier statements is now clarified. He will first be taken before Jewish courts and they will pass him on to the Roman court, where he will be sentenced to crucifixion, specifically mentioning the means of death. By now, the immediate future for Jesus is very close and his thoughts, words and actions are all dominated by the rapidly approaching climax of his life on earth.

Right now, Glenys and I have a sense of what that could have been like – our life has, over the last week or two, been totally dominated by my rapidly approaching knee surgery. Almost every day, there have been check-ups, multiple visits to doctors, blood tests, x-rays, a pre-admission clinic, even trips to the dentist – our lives have become a series of related events, all pointing to a major climax, due to happen on Wednesday this week. But it was so much more so for Jesus – this was not simply a climax in his week, this was the whole purpose of his life, the fulfilment of God's promise and plan since the beginning of time, the climax of all the history of the planet. What a moment, as he shares his heart and soul with his closest friends!

And what a response!

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." (20:20-21).

Do you see the irony? Jesus is sharing himself and his burden so deeply, revealing exactly how the King of the universe is about to allow himself to be completely humbled, arrested as a criminal, tried in several versions of a kangaroo court and, flying directly in the face of everything representing truth and justice, found guilty, condemned and crucified, while the crowds cheer and his enemies gloat – and the best response he can get from his closest and best is an expression of desire for positions of authority and power for two of them when it is all over. Thanks, Mum!

Sure, James and John probably deserved recognition. They, along with Peter, formed the executive committee of the disciple band – they were, at times, treated with special privilege and allowed to be present when everyone else was not – and no doubt Mrs Zebedee had noticed, and was keen to put in her request (which was also clearly supported by her sons themselves). Maybe it was a little too much to ask for both positions – the right and the left of the throne – but I guess if you're going to be in for a penny, you might as well be in for a pound and, after all, they were her boys and she knew they'd be up to the task. She probably hadn't stopped to wonder where Peter might fit in – but if there were only two positions, why shouldn't her boys take them both?

Whatever her reasons, Jesus gives a curt reply –

“You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” (20:22)

– to which James and John, confirming their complicity in the request, respond, *‘We can!’* Full of self-confidence and completely self-assured, they claim they know they can *‘drink the cup’* (whatever it might be) – because they're the best, they're already occupying elevated positions amongst the disciples – why shouldn't they be offered first choice of status in the new kingdom?

Do you hear the echoes of Jesus' theme? Does he need to say it again – *‘the last will be first, and the first last’*? He doesn't, of course – at least not in those words exactly. What he does say is,

“To sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” (20:23)

So it’s really not Jesus’ business – but by now the other disciples are rightly indignant about James and John looking after themselves, with no thought for everyone else in the team, so Jesus calls them all together, and makes his final appeal for their understanding.

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” (20:25)

You know how all the others do it, he says – those who rule over the nations do so with authority and power, they expect to be obeyed and they insist on it as their right. But it should not be that way for you.

“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” (20:26-7)

The first shall be last and the last first – the way to greatness in Jesus’ kingdom is through humility and a heart to serve others, rather than through self-confidence and self-promotion.

And just in case you’ve still missed the point, Jesus hasn’t quite finished yet – he’s now about to deliver the final blow, the knock-out punch, the climax of this whole journey and the heart of the message he has been sharing all along.

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (20:28)

Right from the start, he knew this was where he would finish. He has stated the reason for this journey three times along the way. It has been the key focus for him, not just of this last journey with his friends, but for his whole life on earth. This is the moment for which he was born, the focus of God’s plan for the world he has created, the restoration of all things to himself, and the return of his presence among his people. And it is in this moment that Jesus provides the fullest possible explanation of the conundrum, ‘the first will be last’ – as he points to himself and his example of utterly selfless love and

service, as he *'gives his life as a ransom for many.'* Here we see the fulness of all it meant for Jesus and we finally begin to grasp what it might mean for us.

There are so many applications for this that it is almost impossible to begin. Is it really all about me? Do I always have to insist on my rights or preferences, or can I allow space to consider others and their rights and preferences? As a leader, do I expect everyone to do it my way or do I allow others to make suggestions and have a go their way – and then support them as they do? Do I only ever talk with the people I like at church, or do I go out of my way to look out for those who have no-one to talk with? Am I always in such a hurry to get on with what's important to me that I can never stay back to help stack chairs or wash-up in the kitchen? Could I stop and help that old person struggling with their shopping trolley or do I need to hurry home to get dinner for the family? Do I spend so much money on what I want that I can't support Wicky's request for money to develop a Breakfast Club for hungry kids at school? I could go on, but so can you.

Jesus said,

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Whoever you are, and whatever your position or status, let's all do our best to follow his example!

Matthew 20:17-28

¹⁷ Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him.

²¹ “What is it you want?” he asked.

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

²² “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

“We can,” they answered.

²³ Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”