

Servant

Job 38:1-7; Mark 10:35-45

Many years ago I used to play in a Pipe Band and take part in competitions all around the country. It was fairly gruelling work and most competitions were pretty dull. My favourite one was in Dunoon, the Cowal Games. After the competition, all the Pipe Bands would line up in the park and, led by the drum majors, march down the street back to the ferry.

It must have been deafening, but it was certainly impressive. Across the street flags and bunting had been stretched, and one of the fun things was watching the drum majors, with their maces, twirl and then throw their maces up and over the strung-out bunting, not once, in my memory, dropping the mace on its downward fall. I hate to think what Health and Safety would have said as these drum majors marched and swaggered majestically down the high street, leading the hundreds of bands.

On February 4th, 1968, the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr preaches his last sermon, 'The Drum Major Instinct', exactly two months to the day before his death. The sermon, based on the text we heard from Mark's Gospel, speaks powerfully and perceptively about the human desire to be out in front leading the parade. Even if you're not the person wanting to elbow your way to the front of an event, there are plenty who will say or think things that are just as much about establishing our presence, getting our own way, ensuring that our views (which are always more important than anyone else's – we argue) are heard and predominate. Few of us are immune to this 'drum major instinct' – because most of us believe, rightly or wrongly, that our way is right, or at least better than just about everyone else.

Sometimes we're subtle about it – I've seen authors at the Book Festival putting their books out at the front of shelves where 'people can see them more easily'. I've seen bakers at home-baking stalls pushing their efforts to the front; I remember in one church where I served as a student the internecine warfare that broke out at a flower festival when someone demanded that

the lottery drawn for who got what site was disputed; I've seen guests re-arrange name-places at dinners to make sure they get to sit with the people they want; I've seen people elbow their way to the front of group wedding photographs, in one instance managing to separate the bride and groom.

What Martin Luther King called the Drum Major instinct.

Even if you're not a pushy Peter or Patricia – we like to make sure we're not trodden on, or ignored, and that people pay attention, because, well, you know, what we have to contribute is of *vital importance*, and if other people get a little bit in the way, well, a little firmness on our part won't hurt them, much.

And yes, I am aware of the personal irony of telling you this from up here in a pulpit, six feet above contradiction! That being said, whenever you hear someone say, 'far be it from me to say...' you know to duck. I wonder if you might agree that there are some people whose only form of exercise is jumping to conclusions, and their only vantage point is from their high horses. Present company excluded, of course.

Alfred Adler, the great psychoanalyst, contends that the dominant impulse is that we all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade. This great quest for recognition, this desire for attention, this desire for distinction is the basic impulse – the drum major instinct. Martin Luther King noted that we start early. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention.ⁱ

John Calvin writes about this tricky little Bible story that it contains a 'bright mirror of human vanity,' because 'it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition, or some

other vice of the flesh, so that they who follow Christ have a different object in view from what they ought to have.’ⁱⁱ

These problems are as old as time and as current as the daily news. It is a common insight and accusation that those who would lead often seek their own benefit and glory rather than the benefit of others.ⁱⁱⁱ Wherever we look in politics, business, charity, the arts or the Church we face the problem of how to align the interests of leaders with the interests of the followers as well with the interest of the overall mission.

To ambition and vanity Mark in his gospel has just recorded Jesus telling His followers about His pending suffering and death – but here are James and John jockeying for position in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus would soon find Himself on a cross between two thieves, not these two vain-glorious brothers. James and John are so caught up with the idea of popularity and position and power because they are associated with Jesus that they cannot see the reality of what that association will mean.

Jesus responds. Not in lording it over others; not in demanding you get your own way; not in thinking of yourself more highly than everyone else; but in being a servant. That is the way. That is My way. Says Jesus.

Be a servant. Says Jesus. Be a servant. Says the Servant-King.

Not a doormat; not a person of no consequence; not a person who does not matter; but be a servant. Deal with the drum major instinct. Don’t fall into the trap of pushing other people down because you feel the need to push yourself up. Listen to what Jesus says, to you, to me, to all of us; ‘...whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first

among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve...”

Whether we're living it out or thinking it inside so much that it affects the way we behave, there's more than a little truth in Martin Luther King telling all of us to harness that drum major instinct. One of the ways to do that is to realise that we have often got the perspective of life, and our place within it, all wrong. Which also, for the believer, is a salutary reminder that we have got our perspective on God quite wrong too.

The reading from the Book of Job challenges us to look at the magnitude of the world around us. We are invited to respond with awe at the wonder of God's world, and silence our human pretension and arrogance about the true nature of our role within it. The Bible delivers a telling word to each one of us – we're not as important as we think we are, or we believe we are. We have our place, and our importance, and indeed our uniqueness, but God reminds in the Book of Job, just as Jesus reminds James and John, “Calm down; it's not all about you.” And when it is about us, it is not about our importance, but about our servanthood. It is about our attitude of willingness to speak well of others, and think well of others, and behave well towards others. Be the servant. Like Jesus.

Martin Luther King at the end of his sermon says, prophetically, that if anyone is around when he meets his day, he didn't want a long funeral. Don't talk too long. Don't tell them about the Nobel Peace Prize; or the three or four hundred other awards he had; or where he went to school. “I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr tried to give his life serving others... if I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or song, if I can show somebody he's travelling wrong, then my living will not be in vain. If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, if I can bring salvation to the world once wrought, if I can spread the message as the Master taught, then my living will not be in vain.”^{iv}

It doesn't matter if you're on sitting on Jesus' right or left; it doesn't matter if you're sitting or standing. Real ministry isn't about such things; rather, it is about how you **serve**. Jesus tells us to worry less about leading the parade, or always insisting on having our say because we're the only ones who could ever be right, but rather, through our kindness, and our graciousness, through our forgiving others and accepting forgiveness ourselves; through our generosity of spirit – we make the world, even in the smallest of ways, simply better.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Martin Luther King Jr, Writings and Speeches that Changed the World, p183

ⁱⁱ John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, p417

ⁱⁱⁱ James J Thompson, Feasting on the Word, Year B vol 4 p188

^{iv} Martin Luther King Jr, Writings and speeches that Changed the Word pps191-192