

People will sometimes say that someone's world has been turned upside down. It is generally not a happy experience. It can come after bereavement, loss of job, break up of a relationship – all that gave life meaning, all that we took for granted has been taken away and we are left struggling. Our world has been turned upside down.

During this season of Advent our Gospel readings on Sunday mornings tell of aspects of the ministry of John the Baptist and his ministry of preparing the way. We are also hearing about the nature of the coming Kingdom.

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus is talking after he has received messengers from John the Baptist. John, alone in his prison cell, has heard news of what Jesus has been doing. He is left wondering. Is Jesus really the coming Messiah or has he made a dreadful mistake in pointing to Jesus? So, the messengers have asked Jesus, 'Are you really the one – or are we going to have to look for someone else?' Jesus sends word reminding John of what has been happening in his ministry, assuring John that he has not got it wrong, his work has not been in vain.

After the messengers go, Jesus goes on to tell his disciples and anyone else who is listening:

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. *Matt 11:11*

He speaks of relative status. Status in the eyes of the world is important. We know where we stand. I love an old Monty Python sketch. There are three characters: John Cleese (upper class), Ronnie Barker (middle class) and Ronnie Corbett (working class). Working class man turns to middle class man

and says, ‘I’m working class and I look up to him.’ Middle class man says, ‘I’m middle class and I look up to him (upper class) and I look down on him.’ Upper class man says, ‘I’m upper class and I look down on them all.’ While things are not quite so rigid these days, there is an element of truth in this. People like to know where they stand.

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. *Matt 11:11*

It can be quite threatening to let go of status. There’s an element of the world turning upside down, of things starting to slip out of control. Of course, this is not a modern phenomenon we see plenty of examples of it in the Gospels. Jesus tells the story of the guest invited to dinner who on arrival assumes one of the better seats, only to be told he needs to make way for someone more important and Jesus’ advice ‘Whoever humbles themselves will be exalted and whoever exalts himself will be humbled.’ On occasions we hear of the disciples arguing among themselves as to who will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. On such occasions, Jesus gives them a model of humility – he washes their feet, the task of the lowest household servant; he sets a little child in their midst, saying except you become as a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. The model of the servant, of the child, of taking the lowest place at the feast.

This littleness flies in the face of the world and its interest in status. The child, the servant, the little ones accept the lowest place, accept direction. To be little before God is to accept that we have no claim on God’s love, on God’s grace. To be little before God is to acknowledge the reality of grace – that whatever we have, whatever we are, is ultimately a gift.

This fundamental shift in attitude before God is a hallmark of the Kingdom that John came to announce and Jesus came to usher in. As citizens of the Kingdom we are called to be signs of the Kingdom in our own day, in our own situation. It is only as we become little before God, that we become sensitive to others who are little – little not by choice but by the harsh realities of life – the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed.

In his day, Jesus highlighted those who were little in the society of his day, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the leper, those who were excluded from polite society. A mark of Jesus' ministry was a care and a concern for the very ones society despised. Not a dismissive or condescending care that tossed a few crumbs or spare change their way. This was not a demeaning care but rather a care that affirmed their dignity as human beings, as ones made in the image of God. Our care must be modelled on that of Christ. The way we offer our care must honour the humanity of the one we reach out to help.

At the heart of Jesus' ministry lies the cross – his ultimate care for humanity, a care that reaches down and raises us up with hands that have born the mark of the nails.

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, when he put a little child in their midst it would have had the effect of leaving them feeling just a little uncomfortable. In truth passages such as this need to leave me feeling just a little uncomfortable, we lose must never lose sight of the fact that we stand before God simply and solely on the basis of grace. We need, as I say, to become little before God so that we may, in his name and in his power, be enabled to reach out and draw into the Kingdom those who have nothing or, perhaps more important, those who are thought to be nothing in the eyes of the world.

We began by talking about people's worlds being turned upside down. It can be a very unsettling experience. It can come after bereavement, loss of job, break up of a relationship – all that gave life meaning, all that we took for granted has been taken away and we are left struggling.

Then when Jesus starts talking of status when he says of John the Baptist:

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. *Matt 11:11*

He speaks of relative status. Status in the eyes of the world is important. We know where we stand. There's an element of the world turning upside down, of things starting to slip out of control. But then I go back to grace, to the riches of my littleness. For it is my littleness I discover my riches as one made in the image of God, as one redeemed by God. Out of the riches of my littles I recognise the dignity of those who are little in the eyes of the world – and in that upside down world I discover the peace that God alone can bring.