

Sermon Archive 214

Sunday 23 September, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 9: 30-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It is reckoned that the number of “Make America great again” red golf caps produced is close to 2 million. They cost about \$17.00 to produce, and sell for \$25.00. Although extra factories were opened to meet the demand leading up to the 2016 election, most of the caps were manufactured in the Cali-Fame factory in Carson, Southern California. The factory is the workplace for about 100 workers, 80% of whom speak Spanish. None of them are illegal immigrants. One of them, forty four year old floor manager, Yolanda Melendrez, notes that she is from exactly the demographic that the slogan author has disparaged. As she sees hundreds of thousands of caps going out the door, she remembers the words of her boss, the factory owner: “we’re not political; we’re here to work”. Indeed, rather than get too caught up in the philosophy of the slogan, Yolanda keeps grateful for her job and the money which enables her to put food on the table for her children. Those children are American citizens, like their mother who got citizenship when she was twenty. Her parents are these days permanent residents, originally having come from Mexico.

Speaking of her first involvement with the caps, Yolanda says: "When we first got the

order, I said to myself, 'We're Latinos, we're Mexicans, Salvadoreños. Just wait until he sees who's making his hats.'"

-ooOoo-

Pure sales numbers suggest that the slogan itself is a brilliant piece of psychology or politics. Make America great again.

Who wouldn't want to be great, or live in a country that is great. Greatness is the kind of thing that even appeals to disciples of Christ as they walk along the road to Capernaum. O, to be great! And the genius of the little word that follows: great AGAIN. "Again" links into something winsome, something nostalgic. The simpler past, the golden time, the naivety of a kind of unworldly innocence. Let's go back . . . back to when one language was enough, to when newcomers made the cultural transitions, rather than required cultural transitions from us. Let's go back to days when honest work created enough wealth for locals.

That's something appreciated by Yolanda's boss, Brian Kennedy. Even though he says "we're not political, we're here to work", he tells a story of his business having to keep up with newest technology, with higher operation costs, with strong competition against cheap goods imported from overseas. Through being adaptable, administratively lithe, sometimes a little cut-throat, by being business-intelligent about what strata of worker he's prepared to employ, he's managed to keep his business afloat. But he pines for days when you didn't need to think so complicatedly about so many things. He pines for times in which it was easier to be successful. He longs to do business in a world he understands more plainly. In a way he's typical of the many people from whom "make America great again" is a slogan that resonates. Brian and Yolanda make hats.

One of the hats was photographed by Gage Skidmore, a professional photographer working in Arizona. The photo ended up on the front page of an order of service at Knox Church, Christchurch. The left-leaning minister of Knox Church was confused to read the biography of the photographer. While the minister thought he saw lots of a left-leaning, politically subversive irony in the photo, the photographer, in his bio material, seems to lean like a Republican. Perhaps what the minister is learning is that you can be a Republican and still feel uneasy about a slogan. Here's my slant on the photo.

The hat carries the slogan that resonates for many. The hat pleads for a country to be made great again. And the kind of greatness brought to mind by the many has popular connections to nostalgia, to mono-culturalism, to nationalism, to intolerance. The greatness imagined is to be sought by building a wall, by excluding members of particular religions, by waging trade wars and opting out of expensive

commitments to climate change control. Greatness, in the mind beneath this hat, has much to do with wealth and whiteness.

This hat, though in **this** photo, is being worn by someone whose face I cannot fully see. Is this a faceless person? It's certainly a brown person. Are the eyes Asian? Or could they, perhaps, be Latino - the eyes of someone like Yolanda?

What would it mean if people most vulnerable to climate change (the poor) were calling for their country to be great? What would it mean if marginalised people (the immigrant, the hidden in secret, the Mexican) were calling for the country to be great? What would it mean if those, who in the words of Yolanda were being disparaged, were calling for a country to be great? What would it mean if it wasn't just the annoyed, wealthy and angry people calling out for greatness? What if it were also the cry of the hated, the hindered, the hungry?

Well, I think if that were to happen, then we would need to be taken by the hand, with some directness yet gentleness, right back to the very start of thinking, and helped to understand what true greatness is.

The disciples are ashamed when discovered to have been arguing over who among them was the greatest. Jesus has just been talking about serving, suffering, dying. In the light of that, does their argument about greatness seem just a bit stupid? We don't know what sorts of things they had in their minds when arguing. Mark doesn't seem concerned to have written any of it down. Why write down what is a distraction, an idol, a false goal? What Mark does write down is that the content of their argument made them feel ashamed. Going silent, they have nothing to say. So of weapons and personal connections, of money and acumen, of noise and the power to direct others, of any of the things normally considered great in Roman occupied Israel in the First Century and echoed often in **our** own centuries, we ourselves fall silent. Of any of that, there is nothing to say.

Rather, we speak of what Jesus did next. He says "listen; whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all." Then he takes a child, embraces it in their sight, and says "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me."

If you welcome the small, welcome the "not great", welcome the naïve, then you will find yourselves embracing God, cradling God, serving God, carrying God, loving God, being close to God. If you welcome the last ones, then in that very deed, you fall into the presence of God. Is that great enough in terms of

greatness?

This last Wednesday, celebrations were held around this country, to remember how, 125 years ago to the day, women were given the right to vote in elections. A petition compiled in a house not too far from here, in Clyde Road, was received and accepted. The fifty per cent of the population that previously had been excluded from political participation were given power to participate. Those who had been put and kept in last place, were welcomed in. The previously spuriously considered not-great demographic was allowed to move out of last place. For a country, I think that was Jesus great.

Also this last Wednesday, Jacinda Ardern announced that this country was increasing its quota of refugees from one thousand to one thousand, five hundred. People who previously would have been excluded, turned away, will be welcomed. Previously designated by immigration policy as “not important, not relevant, not great”, five hundred more people now will hear a different story. I consider that deed, by this country, to be Jesus great.

On the Thursday of the week before, India’s Supreme Court unanimously struck down the 150 year old ban on gay sex. Describing the old ban, under which many gay Indians were imprisoned, as “irrational, indefensible and manifestly arbitrary”, the court went further. It declared that all Indians, gay or straight, are to be accorded all the protections of the constitution. Try feeling great when the way you express love is criminal. Try not to feel the littlest and the least when the constitution has not protected you. I consider the decision of India’s Supreme Court last week to be Jesus great.

This week, did the leaders of both Korea’s talk more about demilitarising the peninsula? Did they really continue to explore the idea of not being so strong (or of forming a different kind of strength - a different kind of greatness)? Did they shake hands? Did they smile? If they did, is that the equivalent of embracing the child - welcoming God? If it was, was that perhaps, then, an example of Jesus greatness?

The disciples are locked into a stupid argument about being great. It will bring no greatness at all. Jesus calls humanity to find a new greatness by embodying the servant, the last, the least - and by embracing the once despised and ignored. From beneath a red golf cap, a nameless, faceless human being looks in our direction. Dare we make it great again?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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