

Matthew 18:1-14
The topsy-turvy Kingdom

Humble yourself

You've probably heard that our **Men's reading group** has been meeting more frequently since the Lockdown restrictions started. Each fortnight they've been discussing a different chapter from C S Lewis' ***Screwtape Letters***.

And you might well know the background to that book. Written back in the middle of the last century - so there's a lot set in the context of the Second World War - Lewis' amazing imagination led him to construct this fantasy of letters from a senior demon, Screwtape, to a junior one, Wormwood. Wormwood has been tasked with supervising the temptation and downfall of one particular human being, but, being a young demon, and rather inept, he needs regular mentoring from Uncle Screwtape.

And of course this gives Lewis the opportunity to make all kinds of really very insightful comments about people and society in general, as well as this one imaginary human being in particular. And as Screwtape opens his heart to Wormwood ... with us allowed to overhear ... Lewis suggests to us what demonic schemes he imagines might be current in the world around *us*.

Sometimes he lets slip that some department of demonic affairs has done a fine job in getting people in general to dangerously misunderstand certain words. You can justify greed, for example, if ***luxury*** can be redefined as necessary ... for someone like you.

Fascinating reading. I've been glad of the opportunity to re-read it. It wasn't long ago the guys read one of the chapters when Lewis was talking about humility. I'm not sure that he actually made this particular point, but I think that the world at present has been manipulated into confusing this and another word:

Humility / humiliation

Humility, you see, has always been regarded as a virtue, in the Bible. That was seriously counter-cultural in its day, by the way. The Roman empire typically went in much more for pride. Lowliness was something really to be despised. You could safely look down on people who were servile.

And I think we are going back to making that same mistake, thinking that being humble is the same as being humiliated. Or, even more subtle, this one, that being humbled is the same as being humiliated. So when we get something like what Jesus says in this chapter we've just read, it touches a raw nerve

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 18:4)

Being humbled, people are more likely to think nowadays, is being verbally

abused. It's the same as being "belittled". Nobody should be subjected to treatment that is humiliating; it's inhumane. But in the world's eyes - in the way it is confusing our language - what was the virtue of humility is being downgraded to something vaguely disreputable, or certainly a bit unnecessary. You get a line from a hymn like that one we've just sung

Him exalting, self abasing

and you're tempted to wonder if this is about something grovelling and demeaning. In a world where self-image and self-esteem is so important ... why would someone ever want to be humble?

And if you are ever tempted to ask that question - or you can at least understand why some people might ... then this is a passage we really do need to get our heads around, when **Jesus answers his disciples' pride-driven question with descriptions of how *his* Kingdom is based instead on humility**

And it's not just worthy but totally impractical words. Jesus backs this up with reasons that hit home hard - and hopefully will turn our thinking the right way up again.

The basic question and answer
Four reasons to value and pursue humility

- **The basic question and answer (1-4)**

It's frightfully easy to misread situations, isn't it? Perhaps especially so when you're not so sure of yourself and your own situation. I think that is perhaps behind what is happening in this chapter. It seems to come out of nowhere, if you just start straight in:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

(Matthew 18:1)

And the "at that time" is perhaps a clue that we need to tie this in with what we've just read. But there is another clue which we don't get in this ESV translation, just a subtle one, an extra word in Greek that hasn't been translated into English. It's not as strong as a "therefore", but it could probably be slipped in as "so".

"[So] who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

(Matthew 18:1)

It's just the faintest wisp of a backward glance, something that we've seen in the previous verses of chapters, something that has been growing in the disciples' minds. Growing all out of proportion in the disciples' minds, more like. Gnawing away in the disciples' minds, heightening tensions and rivalries. The kind of group dynamics that happen even in Christian circles. In *any* circles where some things are held in high esteem, and those people who can exhibit those characteristics or deliver those performances are going to be looked up to.

So what has been going on? Think back over what we've seen recently.

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

(Matthew 16:16-17)

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

(Matthew 16:18)

Special favour for Peter? Or for him plus two others?

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ...

(Matthew 17:1-2)

And who was being recognised as the group's spokesman *by others*?

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"

(Matthew 17:24)

Can you see how, maybe, a bit of resentment could have started to grow up here? Why Peter? Why not me? How is it that when Jesus shares this miraculous catch of a fish with a coin that will pay the Temple Tax for two people ... how come it's got to be *Peter* who has that special privilege?

And yet it's not all one way, is it? I can remember that this time of year could be a bit tense, back in the labs. It wasn't going to be long until Personal Development Review time, when everyone's work over the last year was going to be assessed. Particularly when the high-ups decided to follow the latest wisdom from Human Resources gurus, that, in order to keep the workforce motivated, each year, somebody in each group had to be designated as "unsatisfactory".

I can remember the relief when in - it probably was some October time - someone in our group had a **quite spectacular mishap**, and everyone else could feel safer in that the **eye of especial scrutiny** was, that year, focused on that poor unfortunate.

And, let's face it, Peter might have been shown some special favours, but he has also made quite a fool of himself recently, too. I mean ... rebuking Jesus for teaching about the Cross? Remember Jesus' words?

But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

(Matthew 16:23)

And even if it wasn't quite such a spectacular bit of **foot in mouth**, his suggestion on the top of Mount Transfiguration was well up there in the competition for the **Lead Balloon Award**, if I remember right?

And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."
(Matthew 17:4)

So it could have been quite a live question among them. Unlike last year's Premier League, which, everyone was saying, was all but decided by Christmas, there's still numerous candidates thinking they might still be in the running for positions of special favour in this Kingdom of God.

"[So] who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"
(Matthew 18:1)

And Jesus could just have answered their question verbally. But instead, probably making it even more memorable, he deliberately *doesn't* give them a straight answer right away. Can you imagine the puzzled glances as ...

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ...
(Matthew 18:2)

Children are thought of as all-important nowadays. Child protection or safeguarding is a huge concern - and I'm not saying there's anything at all wrong with that. But it wasn't like that at all in the world of Jesus' day. Until they were big enough and strong enough to work, they were extra mouths to feed. They typically don't focus on the important issues of life, and are happy to play around instead of learning gainfully or working productively. Back then, a disproportionate number of them died in infancy. And Roman society permitted infanticide - which was particularly applied to girl babies. In fact, Christians were noted in those years of the later Roman empire for taking in and caring for babies that had been just been thrown out and left to die.

So, bottom line, children back then were not typically seen as particularly valuable. And yet, when asked about greatness, Jesus *doesn't* give a verbal answer, but calls a *kid* over. A *little kid*, if you check over in Mark's account of this,

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ...
(Mark 9:36)

One who could be easily enough picked up ... and therefore probably of *even less* popular value. Of even less note to an important person walking the streets. Unless that person was Jesus Christ.

So this is pretty a jaw-dropping answer that Jesus gives here. Here's your answer to the question about who is greatest. It's not any of you - or, at least, not specifically. Only in general and prospective terms. It *could* even be all of you, because it's a "whoever". So it's open to anyone. And to anyone *here today*, too.

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 18:4)

And notice especially, it's not a question of whether someone is just naturally more meek by temperament, just a calmer, quieter, less ambitious person by nature. It is not a question of who you are, but who you are seeking to become. It is not a question of what the world has done to you, whether you have *been* humbled - or humiliated. It is whether you are consciously and intentionally seeking to humble *yourself*. To *become* humble. To train yourself in that way.

There has been a lot of discussion, though, of precisely what aspect of child-likeness this Jesus might be focusing on. I'm not sure that even now I have really nailed this down. I don't think Jesus is talking about what we might call “innocence”, because we know that kids can certainly behave in some mean and vindictive ways, and they're not necessarily just copying bad role models when they are instinctively selfish. They are certainly *not* just naturally compliant. Who has ever had to teach a child the word **NO!**

If I had to guess, I'd say it is perhaps in that children unconsciously realise that they are not self-sufficient. They simply accept that they are not the big people now, and they ask unashamedly for help. In fact, when Jesus refines his description of “these little ones”, he specifies ...

“... one of these little ones who believe in me ...”

(Matthew 18:6)

And I wonder if that isn't the key feature that Jesus is promoting here. *Trusting in him*. So if Jesus *hasn't* nominated Peter or Thomas or whoever as “the greatest” - then they don't need to play that game. And if he *does*, in the future, to trust that Jesus knows what he is doing, such that envy and rivalry is not so much ungodly, but just simply unnecessary.

And that would have to include trusting Jesus for salvation, too. Not thinking that you ought, for decency's sake, for the sake of your pride, contribute something to being saved. It is so humiliating, we would say - but that's wrong, it's simply humbling - it's so *humbling* to realise to realise that it has to be

*Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to thy cross I cling
Naked, come to the for dress
Helpless, come to thee for grace*

So *humiliating* to be thought helpless, in total need! No, just humbling. Just the spiritual reality. That is the way into the Kingdom of God, as well as the way *of* the Kingdom of God. And it's the first of the four reasons that Jesus gives to illustrate the meaning of this anonymous little kid being the greatest of all.

- **Reason 1: entry into the Kingdom (3)**

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 18:3)

Folks, you can see why it happens, but there is the danger of minimising the force of some of the things that Jesus says. Because they are *hard*. And we would maybe rather see more people in church, we and they happily thinking that they are followers of Christ, but dropping out this hard teaching of being humble. Of being humbled. Of humbling yourself. Of accepting that you can only accept grace, and you cannot bring a single thing to the table yourself.

There's that word “turn” there. Or you can read other Bible versions and see translations like “change”. The AV has “be converted”, and that's good too. If I've understood it right, there is an ambiguity in the word that Matthew uses, so that this word has flavours of both “turn” and “be turned”, “change” and “be changed”.

The whole natural human approach has to be spun on its head. Instead of thinking that we are worthy of entry into this Kingdom of God, instead of striving to *show* ourselves worthy of it, we must accept that we are not. And yet we are granted entry *only* through the worthiness and effort of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever been to one of those theme parks with another family. I remember going to the **Eden Project** with Jenny's brother and his family. For the adults, we had to think it out, did we pay for ourselves, or did we offer to share the family cost, or what? That's adult thinking. The kids knew that someone was paying for them - even if they didn't know precisely what proportion might have come from their parents and what from us.

So until you're happy to accept that you will never pay your own way in or into the Kingdom of God, but be there only on account of the generosity of God ... then, isn't this what Jesus says here, you just can't enter? So ... will you join the queue insisting that you're an adult, haggling over who pays what ... and on that account be refused admission ... or will you just go on in with God's other little kids, and enjoy his grace?

Will you mentally turn yourself ... and be turned by the work of the Holy Spirit within you? ... or will you stand outside, on a matter of ... we say, principle ... but it's really a matter of pride!

- **Reason 2: receiving the King (5)**

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ...”

(Matthew 18:5)

From this point onwards there is a change in tack. Jesus is developing this idea. He has started with a literal little kid, and said that we have to become *like this*, in some profound way. But then he has tacked on “who believes in me” ... and I don't think he's just referring there just to youngsters who have put their trust in him. I see this as broadening out. Not just literal youngsters, now, but what you might call

“lowly believers” of all ages. It’s the kind of person you see mentioned later on in the Bible:

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

(Romans 12:16)

So the class structure of the society around you is to be suspended when you become part of the church. A rich Roman citizen could find themselves as a member of a church in which all of the leaders and teachers were slaves. The Roman citizen does not take charge because of their position in the world around. They may even be called upon to *submit* to those slaves, in this context:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

(Hebrews 13:17)

Submit, and don’t even grit your teeth about it. Because, says Jesus, those “lowly” people whom you now welcome and value are strangely ennobled. When you welcome one of them, when you shake them by the hand, when you’re seen in their company, in that slightly less salubrious neighbourhood, and enter their rather scruffy house ...

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ...”

(Matthew 18:5)

In fact, I think we need to push this further, because pride is a slippery beast. We can welcome someone like that, someone below us in the world’s food chain ... but still unconsciously (proudly?) reckon to retain our position as a “benefactor”. You can welcome them to your **mansion** as equals, as brothers and sisters in Christ. You can give them a lift there in your posh car.

Saying that reminds me of one of the couples in our previous church. Clive was a real high-flyer, seriously. He moved on from Harlow to head up the DVLA in Swansea, and retired with a CBE. But he drove around the estate kids from our youth group in the back of his very swish Jag.

But (not that I’m saying Clive did!) it is possible for someone like that to subtly retain their upper-ness, if I can put it like that, in the church. The next step is to allow someone who is plainly “lower” than you to bless *you*. You accept a lift in *their untidy car*. You drink their **instant coffee** sitting on their settee with the **rather dodgy suspension**. And you do it as gladly and as warmly as if it was them in your house.

And you receive that person *by receiving from* that person, by granting them the honour of being able to give to you.

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ...”

(Matthew 18:5)

Why be humble? Why humble ourselves? Folks, your **visitors book**, even without your realising it, when your next guest opens it to enter their name, and scans through the names of those who have been there before, may be able to perceive behind the names of Bert Boggins and family, and maybe their several muddy dogs as well, the name of Jesus Christ himself.

- **Reason 3: the danger of encouraging sin (6-9)**

Notice this terrible *but* now. That tells us more clearly what Jesus is talking about here. It is the converse of “receiving one such child”.

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

(Matthew 18:5-6)

The implication, I think, is that by receiving someone like this, we may help them to grow in grace. Actually, they may also help *us* to grow in grace, too - perhaps even by testing our patience or things like that, stretching us in ways that *God* knows we need to be stretched, because we’re maybe ourselves getting a bit spiritually flabby.

But, bottom line, to welcome someone is to do them some good, in the name of Jesus. The problem is therefore what happens if we *refuse* or *neglect* to do so.

What if someone **doesn’t look like the traditional churchgoer**, and we decide that we’re only going to accept someone a bit more conventional? They’ve got to fit into our more comfortable church mould first!

What if someone God sends to this church hasn’t learned to not call out and answer when the preacher asks a question?

What if they haven’t yet got all their theological **ducks in a row**, and need to revisit, numerous times, things that have sunk into place over the decades?

Or what if they’re a bright teenager who is obviously going to go to university, and will very likely never come back here to be a part of this church? But right now it will be big job to disciple them in the faith!

Are we prepared to put ourselves out for the sake of people like this? Or will be put up, in practice, a sign on the door saying “Nice mature Christians only need apply”.

We might not be a middle-class church, but we’re a nice, respectable working-class church. So the misfits can move along down the line.

Yes, of course, the world is a hard place. People do fall by the wayside. It’s not as if anyone we welcome will somehow be magically protected from all

temptations. But if we refuse to receive them, and leave them more vulnerable ...

“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”

(Matthew 18:7)

Woe to the ones who have permitted those temptations to strike home harder. Remember how serious sin actually is! - as Jesus has already told us once, in this account written by Matthew.

“And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

(Matthew 18:8-9)

- **Reason 4: the esteem of heaven (10-14)**

It's nice to spend time with some Christians. And there are some others for whom it's like football back at school in the bad old days, and the two designated captains **pick teams**. I usually ended up as one of the full backs, because there was usually someone even less valuable to the team who would have to play goalie.

But there are some Christians in most churches who aren't attractive, or "such good company", who don't have a whole lot to offer, humanly speaking, who can't or don't contribute financially, as far as we know. Rather pitiable people, if we're honest. But this Kingdom of God, remember, is a **topsy-turvy kingdom**. And people like that are heaven's delight!

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

(Matthew 18:10)

(We'll talk this evening about whether that implies anything about so-called "guardian angels.")

"The face of my Father", I'm taking to mean, is that they have special access. We'd probably use a different figure of speech now: "they have his ear". Just think of those vast **penguin colonies** where a baby - that looks like every other baby to you and me - is distinguished from every other baby by their parent's ears. And our heavenly Father is specially listening out, it seems, for the voice of those specially unlovely believers.

In fact, it's not just listening out, it is seeking out.

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is

not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

(Matthew 18:12-14)

Not even one. Not even *that* one.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

(Matthew 18:1)

There is one more answer I need to give you to this. Remember Jesus’ actual nearest-to-a-straight answer:

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 18:4)

That very word is picked up by Paul in one of his letters, possibly quoting an early Christian hymn. We will finish this morning by reading it through. And asking ourselves, *so who is the greatest in this topsy-turvy Kingdom of heaven?* I think the answer will be quite plain.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:3-11)

“He humbled himself”.

Which is why, in the topsy-turvy Kingdom of heaven, *he*, Jesus, is the greatest. The King. Our king.