“Always remember who you are!” Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Today’s Gospel reading pretty much follows the same line of thoughts which we already discussed the last week. In the gospel according Mark this is already the second time when Jesus is teaching His disciples about His true mission, His death and resurrection. And it’s not fun. Not at all.

When we read verses like these it becomes clear why only a few are ready to respond to Jesus invitation and to become His disciples. To be a Christian is just too hard a calling.

Today we will look once more at how Jesus describes His mission, what people often want from Him and how we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Jesus mission, people’s misunderstandings and what it really means to be a Christian.

When Jesus was teaching about His death and resurrection for the first time, Peter rebuked Him: “This shall never happen to you!” And Jesus kindly replied. “Get behind me Satan!” ‘You don’t focus on the things of God, but on the things of men.”

Meaning, you are not interested in what God’s will is, you are only interested in your own happiness. But if you want to be my disciples, then turn away for your self-centeredness and seek the will of your Father in Heaven.

Now Jesus is teaching His disciples again. We can see that Jesus pays a great deal to get this message through to His disciples. He wants them to understand why He is here, and what His main mission is.

He even chooses to travel in a way that no one disturbs them so that He can teach and explain to His disciples the very purpose of His coming. “The Son of Man is
going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

The death on the cross was the very purpose for the Son of God to become a man. You know that the wages of sin is death. This is our ultimate enemy against whom we are hopeless. This we all have in common. And there is nothing we can do.

Jesus came, so that He, being innocent and without sin, could receive our wages, death that our sin deserves. Now with His death things are out of order. Because death is the wages of sin, death has no power over innocent man.

So Jesus rises again. He lives. But He already has receive death. What we justly deserve has already taken place. And because He has received our death, now He can offer us the free gift of God - eternal life. He has won the ultimate victory and offers us something that we could never ever achieve on our own.

This was Jesus true mission, the greatest victory, and the greatest mystery of all. But the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying, and were afraid to ask him. But they did not understand…

There is a problem with Jesus message. This is a real problem for us as well. What Jesus was telling His disciples went against everything they could understand. Jesus message was too great for them to comprehend. Why?

Here He was, their teacher and leader. Wise, powerful, able to work miracles and possessing incredible powers. Here they were, His disciples, following Him and getting ready for the glory of Jesus kingdom, once it is established. That was their plan. That was their hope.

This they could understand. This is what we can understand easily as well. If you have a power and influence, then you can get things done. And if you stay close to someone who has a power and influence, you can hope to get your share as well.

All of that made sense for the disciples, but not this teaching: “I will be killed, and after three days I will rise again.” It is not that these words are not clear. They are simple and clear. Even a child can understand them. What is difficult is to make sense of these words.

For they are so contra intuitive. How can something that started so well, so promising for the disciples end so badly? If the disciples were heading together with Jesus to their bright future, to the Kingdom that Jesus was to establish, how could His death possibly fit in?!

Imagine that you are walking up the stairs… up and up and up, higher and higher, and then Jesus says that soon we’ll be in the basement. It doesn’t make sense. You would think that there must be something wrong. The two pieces simply don’t come together. Going up and ending up in the basement.
This is what disciples struggled to understand. This is what so many Christians struggle to understand. They hear about God and Jesus Christ and think that now we are going to go up and up and up, that everything is going to be better and better, but then Jesus turns and asks for something totally inappropriate: “Deny yourself, take your cross, and follow me!”

We are looking for His help so that we can fulfill our dreams, but Jesus is saying ‘deny yourself!’ It is no wonder that the disciples didn’t understand Him. They were thinking the things of men, not the things of God.

They were concerned with this life and how to do well here. They couldn’t see the big picture. And we so often struggle with it too.

**Then they came to Capernaum. And when Jesus was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.**

This is what the disciples understood. This is what they could fully engage with. Who is the greatest? This is what we can understand as well. Who is the greatest? There are many ways to find who is the greatest.

Our culture, or we can say this world in general, is so good at asking this question. We try to teach it in our schools, that this is what matter. Achievements, success, greatness. We are no different in the Church. We may think about ourselves, who is the greatest Christian among us? Who has done the greatest works?

Which is the greatest congregation? Which is the greatest school? We may like to praise ourselves. And we may like to praise others, hoping to receive the same in return. You are such a great person! Such as wonderful Christian! You have done such a great job! You are so great!

It may even be true. The problem with this question about greatness is in its focus. Where is the focus? Where are we looking for this greatness? In a mirror! The focus is on me! Who is the greatest? This is what the disciples were arguing about.

It is the old, cunning snake whispering in our ears… you, you will be like gods. So great! So smart, so wonderful. This is where we as Christians are not immune at all. This is where we often are followers of the world, not of Christ.

Now try to imagine Jesus arguing with the Pharisees and the scribes and trying to prove that He is the greatest teacher of the Word ever? Who is the greatest? I am! Can you possibly picture Jesus doing something like that? It even feels wrong.

Instead, He says very different words. “I am going to suffer for you, I am going to die for you. I will rise again from the dead for you.” Jesus knew who He was, the Son of God, He didn’t need to prove anything. He was free to serve others.
We are disciples of Jesus Christ. We are to learn from Him, and this is what He teaches about greatness. Jesus “sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

Again, Jesus. You are saying something that doesn’t fit together in our minds. If you want to be the greatest, then you need to be the servant of all? In this world, the greatest is the one to whom everyone else serves.

The more people serve you, the greater you are. And you are saying that if we, as your disciples, want to be great, then we need to be servants of all? We come to you so that you help us to get higher in this life and you are saying that we need to get lower and be servants of all? Help us to understand it!

Then Jesus takes a child and puts it in their midst, and “said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

For us it is easy to misunderstand this thing with the child. But the point Jesus is making is a very simple one. You are arguing who is the greatest, but here is someone we all can agree is not the greatest.

He is just a child. And children at that times were not such objects of adoration as they often are these days. This was something all disciples could agree. The child was the least among them.

Now, Jesus says, who serves the least among us, serves me, and who serves me, serves God the Father, who sent me. Everything seems to be upside down with this Jesus. It is no surprise that He does not have too many disciples.

Who would want to follow this kind of leader? No wonder that so many these days are ashamed of Jesus and His words. How can this teaching be appealing in this competitive world?

In fact, it can. Once the Holy Spirit enlightens our hearts. We are worried about proving ourselves, being greater, more important, being something, having some worth. And we focus on ourselves, trying to match these criteria.

The sweet truth is, that you don’t have to. You really don’t need to worry about your greatness, or worth, or importance. For you already are great in the eyes of God the Father. When He created you, He made you in His image, to be His representative here on Earth. This status makes you as great as you can be.

You don’t have to worry about your greatness. You are great in the eyes of Jesus Christ. We all know that if there is something really precious we are happy to give up other things just to obtain that one.
This is what Jesus Christ did. He, the Son of God, found you so important for Him that He gave everything up, even His life, so that only He could obtain you, so that only you could be with Him.

You are great already, for in your baptism you were made an heirs of God’s Kingdom. God’s eternal Kingdom. This is who you are. You already are as great as anyone could ever dream to be.

This is what Jesus tries to teach you. Once you understand it, once you allow it to sink it, everything else also makes sense. The point is, the Kingdom of God is not of this world. It is eternal, almighty Kingdom, which doesn’t need to prove its name to this world.

People of God’s Kingdom don’t live according the rules of this world. They don’t define their values according the rules of this world. For us as children and heirs of God everything is different.

Death is life. Defeat is victory. Weakness is strength. For us the greatest power is found in the cross of Jesus. The greatest wisdom in the foolishness of the message of forgiveness.

The greatness of a Christian is found in their humble service to others. To deny yourself is to find yourself. To take your cross is to find your happiness and fulfilment. This is the secret that the world in its futile attempts doesn’t know.

Jesus changes our whole thinking. He helps to see things as God sees them. This is the true wisdom, as James, the brother of Jesus wrote in His letter. To see this world and our lives through the eyes of God.

When we are not concerned with ourselves, with our greatness, we can have a proper focus. We can daily rejoice focusing on Jesus Christ. He has revealed His love to you.

He comes to you to deliver the forgiveness of your sins and to give you the gift of eternal life. He cares for you, in Him is your security and future. He is the meaning and purpose of your lives. He does it for you, so that you can freely serve others.

When we pursue our greatness, it divides us. When we pursue the good and the salvation of others, it unites us. It restores, heals and builds up the community, it helps the human community to flourish, and it helps the Kingdom of God to grow.

Always remember who you are. You are sons and daughters of the Triune God. You are heirs of God’s Kingdom. You don’t need to prove that you are the greatest. You already know it. Just live as who you are, trusting your God, serving your neighbors, and witnessing to them what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has done for them. Amen.