Reflection on: the Greatest Disciple, Prepared by Fiona

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in the Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. Amen

Introduction: Just before the start of World War II, Albert Einstein had become so famous he couldn't walk down the street without being stopped several times and asked to explain "his theory." Einstein was known for his humility as well as his genius, and he eventually came up with a way to deter the attention and adulation of fans. "Pardon me, sorry!" he would say. "Always I am mistaken for Professor Einstein."

As an agnostic, Einstein may be an unlikely candidate to introduce a Christian reflection on "the greatest Disciple." Jesus' idea of greatness is a life of serving others rather than seeking personal status. Einstein has a lot to contribute to a contemporary understanding of humility, as he says 'It is high time the ideal of success should be replaced with the ideal of service…. Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.' Genius as he was, he said being s scientist was like 'a little child entering a huge library…The child knows that someone must have written those books. It does not know who or how…The child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books, a mysterious order, which it does not comprehend but only dimly suspects.'

For Einstein fame was something to avoid. In Mark's Gospel the Disciples famously argue, who among them is the greatest. (Mark 9:34). In their self-above-others approach, unlike our Mr. Einstein, the Disciples seemingly sought recognition without the effort and personal development required to achieve it. Crucially, Jesus does not condemn their failed enterprise, rather, he shows them what true greatness is and he uses the example of small child, the 'least person of all' to teach them.

In our own time we might think that we have not achieved much when compared with figures of modern history and science. Thomas Edison provides another example. Edison has been described as among the world's greatest inventors. Edison's inventions included sound recording, the motion picture camera, and most famously the first commercial light bulb.

Whilst Edison had a major impact on the modern industrialized world. It is also worth remembering that he reportedly failed 10,000 times at his light bulb creating enterprise, yet where would each of us be today

without electric light? Edison's example shows that achieving greatness takes learning, patience and discernment. Whether we like it or not, the humility of recognising failure is often a necessary stepping-stone to achieving great things. From the Gospels, letters and Wisdom books we learn that from failure comes humility and from Humility comes Wisdom (Proverbs 11).

From the Book of James, we learn the value of those who are wise and understanding among us (James 3:13). James teaches that we can exhibit the godly character of Wisdom through humility. In contrast, selfish ambition shows the opposite. (James 3:13-18). In the Semitic Hebrew and Aramaic oral tradition, the words success and failure are not part of common parlance. Instead, scripture is abound with stories of fruit, seeds and pathways. Failed ambition would likely have been described as 'unripe' or 'unfruitful' which leaves space for fruit to ripen in due season. The fruit has not failed to grow, it is just not ready yet. In the Wisdom tradition success and failure are rarely finite and more often a journey. As James teaches us, 'the ready tree brings forth ripe fruit, the unready tree brings forth unripe fruit.' The person of good fruit or ripe fruit is wise, gentle and full of mercy, (James 3:17).

From the Gospel of Mark (Mark 9), we learn that Greatness is the fruit of humility, a quality which takes time to mature. At this point of Mark's Gospel, we are with Jesus and his Disciples. The Disciples were talking among themselves on the dusty road toward Capernaum, Galilee, having just absorbed the shocking news that Jesus will be betrayed and killed, the Disciples did not yet fully understand the situation and were afraid to ask. The word 'afraid' in this context means 'awe' as the Disiples were also coming to terms with Jesus' identity as God. If the Disciples were Thomas Edison their lightbulb moment had not yet arrived, at this point they were only dimly aware of the bigger picture surrounding Jesus' life and ministry.

Like other spiritualties originating in the East; Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, Christians also know that Humility is a major tenant of their own faith. In arguing about who was the greatest, the Disciples appear to have failed spectacularly on this fundamental principle. Yet their present journey towards Jerusalem, implies a transformative path towards understanding which will bear fruit in due season. Certainly, with their teachers death foretold, the Disciples were not ignorant of their opportunity. Earlier in Mark (1:22) we learn that the people 'were amazed at Jesus teaching; [and that] Jesus was teaching them as one having authority,' different to the Temple Scribes. Let's not forget that Scribes in the Jewish tradition were both religious scholars and legal experts. This means the greatness of Jesus teaching was recognised as unmatched in the Temple. The Disciples may also have recognised the possibility of inheriting their Master's great status upon his death, as was the custom in the Ancient Near East.

As they travelled, Jesus, was teaching his Disciples, so what did he need them to know?

Jesus, directs his Disciples' attention toward the Wisdom that the 'first must be last of all and servant of all.' (Mark 9:35). Here, in order for anyone to be first (or greatest), they must assume the position of last (or most insignificant). This was quite different to accepted Jewish teaching. Crucially, service is different to servitude. Service is an active choice in our lives. Having admitted to Jesus that they had been discussing with one another 'Who do you think is the greatest?', the Disciples were embarrassed at the choice they mad made. Significantly, Jesus does **not** criticise them but instead aims to reverse the concept by teaching them.

In the manner of the Ancient Near East, Jesus demonstrates his teaching figuratively. He picks up a small child—possibly a child of one of Jesus many followers on the way. He put the child among them; and taking it in his arms, said 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' During the first century, a child represented the lowest order in the social scale. Receiving a child first reverses the accepted social stratification by placing status on the unimportant. In Jesus' time, children were without status, or at least were of a low status. They possessed none of the properties by which status was judged. Crucially, they owned nothing. In many examples, Jesus accepted the person of socially low status, thereby choosing to compromise his own position

within the community. This is seemingly exactly what the Disciples were preoccupied with, their own self-above-others status. Jesus wanted them to make better choices.



It is important to avoid condemnation of the Disciples, or our brothers and sisters, believers and unbelievers alike. Aside from social convention there were reasons why James and John might consider themselves greater. In context, Peter, James and John, had recently been set apart from the other Disciples and had witnessed the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13), and the true identity of Jesus had been revealed to them, yet they did not fully understand. The Transfiguration scene with Elijah and Moses beside Jesus, showed the Disciples Jesus greatness as the one who fulfilled the promises and prefigurements of the Old Covenant, the greatest possible event in of their Jewish faith. Accordingly, further on in Mark's Gospel, James and John request a share in Jesus Glory with seats at Christ's right and left. Perhaps this request was mirroring the Glory of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, or perhaps fulfilling a desired position of eminence and authority beside the enthroned Jesus as the eschatological judge at the end times? As Marks Gospel says, Jesus recognised that the Disciples did not understand what they were asking for.



Although I do not believe this was the case, if the Disciples seeking was the self-aggrandising enterprise that it initially appears to be, then perhaps a point of irony is that the 'least of all' turned out to be the two Bandits at Jesus left and his right at the crucifixion. Here, the repentant thief humbly expects nothing but publicly declares Jesus' as Son of God and achieves his place with Jesus in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

As St Benedict said in chapter Seven of famous Monastic rule which governed the Nuns of Romsey Abbey from the 11th Century, 'Whoever exalts themselves shall be humbled, and whoever humbles themself shall be exalted' (Luke 14:11; 18:14). When Jesus taught his twelve Disciples he said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35). Aspiring to serve is the work of good fruit, the wise, the gentle and the full of mercy, (James 3:17), it is a journey which I feel is of the heart, and one which will always be undertaken imperfectly.

Beginning Meditation:

You are invited to take up a comfortable position. Bring loving attention to your body. After taking a couple of deeper breaths, let your breath find its own relaxing rhythm. Allow your mind to settle and wander for a short time, perhaps reflecting on a peaceful space or candle, walking outside, or imagining gazing outside through a window. Wander in your mind's eye for a few moments before settling on your sacred word, breath or image. It is useful to have a single focus of attention during meditation.
In your practice, you may find it useful to be united with the rhythms of nature and our sacred relationship with what God has created. A relationship that needs to be tended in order to feed our spirit, mind, and body. You may also find it helpful to sense a connection with the practice of other faiths, and our journey together.

25-minute meditation begins

Post meditation: Thoughts from Buddhism

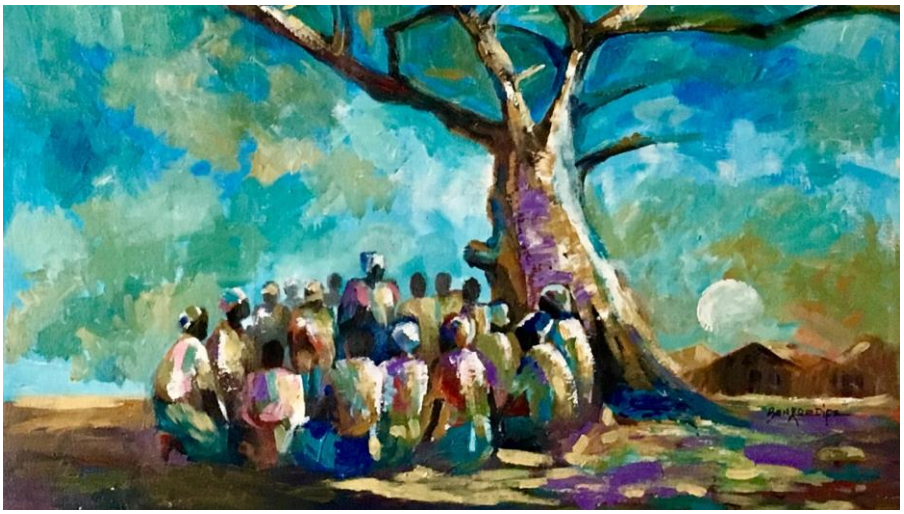
‘A traditional Buddhist story tells of the time after the Buddha’s death when he descended into the hell realms to liberate all the tormented beings imprisoned there. Mara (the personification of delusion) wept and mourned, for he thought he would get no more sinners for hell. The Buddha said to him, “Do not weep, for I shall send you all those who are self-righteous in their condemnation of sinners, and hell shall fill up again quickly.”

The news of the impending death of a beloved and esteemed teacher swept through the village, well-wishers gathered to pay their last respects and honour him. Standing around the master’s bedside, one by one they sang his praises and extolled his virtues as he listened and smiled weakly. “Such kindness you have shown us,” said one devotee. Another extolled his depth of knowledge, another lamented that never again would they find a teacher with such eloquence. The tributes to his wisdom, compassion, and nobility continued until the master’s wife noticed signs of restlessness and kindly asked his devotees to leave. Turning to her husband, she asked why he was disturbed, remarking upon all the wonderful tributes that had showered him. “Yes, it was all wonderful,” he whispered. “But did you notice that no one mentioned my humility?”

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Take some time for your personal prayer …Amen

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources: Image (Jesus teaches his Disciples) from: https://www.imb.org/2017/11/27/3-reasons-bible-storying-essential/
https://www.paulomanfineart.com/drawn-to-the-word/shop/three-crosses-of-calvary-pr/
http://illuminationsbymike.blogspot.com/2019/03/transfiguration.html





Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.