

Article by Canon Michael Harper

### **Always greater.**

"You shall see greater things than that" (John 1:50).

In John chapter 1 we are told how Philip witnessed to Nathanael. As soon as Nathanael heard that Jesus came from Nazareth, he said cynically, "can anything good come from there?" (Jn 1:46). Philip did not attempt to argue, he just said "come and see".

Now Nathanael, with all his scepticism, was an honest no nonsense person. Within minutes of meeting Jesus he is confessing him "the Son of God, the King of Israel". It was then that Jesus said to him, "you shall see greater things than that".

What an extraordinary conversion! How did it come about? It all has to do with revelation. Conversion always does. It is God who reveals himself to us, we never find him by ourselves. What struck Nathanael was that Jesus knew all about him, and yet had never met him! He knew the type of person he was, and told him so. He knew he had been under a fig tree. He knew the exact circumstances of his coming to see him. So Nathanael changes his attitude entirely, and confesses that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel.

For Jesus this was only five out of ten. "You shall see greater things than that" he says. In other words, you have seen something, but there is

much more for you to see. He had declared Jesus to be "the King of Israel", which was only partly true. Jesus was to be the King of the whole human race. That was part of the greater revelation he needed to see. Great though the change was, he still had limited vision.

Some years ago Dr. Basilea Schlink wrote a helpful book with the title God is always greater. The book describes a small community in Darmstadt, Germany, which started in the closing stages of World War 2. One night the city was devastated by aerial bombardment, yet not a single sister was injured, although most of the city was destroyed. The story goes on to describe the growth of the community through the hard post-war period, when they proved again and again that "God is always greater". Nathanael had to learn that too.

I have found the title of this book a constant encouragement when facing the challenges to one's faith which often come in life. Sometimes we are tempted to imagine that some problem is greater than God himself! That can never be so. God is always greater.

#### Becoming greater.

As we read on in St John's gospel we learn about another person who encounters Jesus in a special way, one of his own family. John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, and they had grown up together. John needed no conversion, he was filled with the Holy Spirit the moment he was born (Luke 1:15). But when he met Jesus he had to learn a similar lesson.

In John's case he acknowledged that the revelation he had of Christ

came "from heaven" (John 3:27). He had a famous and popular ministry, in which thousands were flocking to hear him. But he accepted that all this was about to change. Someone greater was coming on the scene, and so, "he must become greater, I must become less" (John 3:30).

We need greater revelation, and can never exhaust it. We also need to see that Jesus Christ gets the glory. That he is "always greater" than us. It is sometimes a temptation to bask in the wonder of what God has done to us and through us. Human pride always stands at the door seeking entry. We need to resist it whenever we hear the knock. Instead, like John we need to say, "he must become greater...". That is the true meaning of the word "magnify", to make God greater than anything else on this earth, especially our own personal lives.

#### Doing greater things.

When Jesus was about to leave this earth, he gave careful orders to his disciples. He knew they would be depressed, and could easily give up after he had gone. He knew too that they would say to themselves "we can never do what he did". He knew they would all struggle with an inferiority complex, and so never attempt to do the great work that he accomplished.

There is one part of the work of Christ no one can make a contribution to. That is his death on the cross and his resurrection and ascension to heaven on our behalf. But there was still much for them to do in his name. To prepare them for this discouragement, he told them they would not be left on their own. The Holy Spirit would always enable them to carry on

the work Jesus had begun. They chiefly needed faith. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing" (John 14:12).

But amazingly Jesus did not leave it there. He went on to say, "he will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father". That must have taken them completely by surprise! They must have been doubting their ability to begin to match his great ministry, yet alone surpass it. Now he encourages them to believe that they would be able to accomplish more than even he did.

Did it happen? Of course it did! Jesus never saw three thousand people converted in one day. Jesus never healed anyone by his shadow passing over them, as Peter did (Acts 5:15). Sometimes people were healed by handkerchiefs being taken to the sick (Acts 19:12). Jesus is still always greater, but sometimes his disciples do things by faith which are greater than he did.

Love is always greater.

Jesus knew that the greatest thing of all is love. If nothing else the Church would prosper if there was enough love, love for God, love for the truth, and love for one another. If all else failed the Kingdom would be extended and people drawn to the Saviour if his people would love the world as he did.

Part of his final talk to them includes those famous words, often seen on grave stones, "greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his

life for his friends" (John 15:13). This is not saying that laying down your life for someone gives you salvation. Paul confronts this in 1 Corinthians 13:3, when he writes "if I give my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing". Salvation does not come through our sacrifice, but God's.

What does it mean? There is an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical in London called "aspects of love". Jesus is commending sacrificial love as greater than any other aspect. It is this greater love which was the key to his life and ministry, and should be to ours.

#### Praying for the greater things.

There are always dangers of thinking and praying for bigger and greater things. So I commend this statement from an unknown disciple:

I asked for strength, that I might achieve; he made me weak that I might obey.

I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things.