

Sermon 9 September 2018 Humility

Luke 14:7-11

As always, Jesus uses quite a simple, homely illustration to highlight an eternal truth. And it's all about humility. If a quite undistinguished guest arrives early at an important feast and seats himself at the top table, and then a more distinguished person arrives, and so the first person is asked to step down from the top table, there is a degree of embarrassment for everyone, and especially for the person who is asked to step down.

If, on the other hand, a person seats himself at a lowly place and then is asked to move to a more distinguished place, his humility earns him all the more honour.

Humility has invariably been one of the characteristics of great people. There are exceptions. Muhammed Ali once said, 'It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am.' Mind you, Ali was the exception to most rules.

In contrast, I am sure many of you have heard of Thomas Hardy, one of the great English poets. When Thomas Hardy was so famous that any newspaper would gladly have paid enormous sums for his work, he used to sometimes submit a poem, and always with it a stamped and addressed envelope for the return of his poem should it be rejected. Even in his greatness he was humble enough to think that his work might be turned down. This humility only served to enhance his greatness, his *mana*.

And this word *mana* is interesting in itself. There is no one English word which can adequately reflect the meaning of *mana*, which is, of course, why the word has been integrated into the New Zealand English language. A person with *mana* is someone we look up to, we respect, and in the original meaning of the word as used in the Maori language, humility is a very important element of *mana*.

Let me tell you a story. One day a person came to a king for an interview. The person had to wait for a long time because the king was very busy. Finally, the king said he could come in. When the person entered the hall, the first thing he did was to take off his hat and bow to the king. Immediately the king took off his crown and bowed to the man. After the man had left, the ministers and others who were around the king asked, 'Why did you do that? He took off his hat because he is an ordinary man. But you are the king. Why should you take off your crown?'

The king said to his ministers, 'You fools, do you think I wish to remain inferior to an ordinary person? He is humble and modest. His humility is a peerless virtue. He showed his respect to me. If I did not take off my crown, then I would be showing less humility than an ordinary man and therefore I would not be as good as him. If I'm the king, I should be better than everybody in everything. That is why I took off my crown and bowed to him.'

Now that's a very wise king. He understood not only the true meaning of humility, but also the undoubted significance and impact of humility.

So just what is humility? C S Lewis put it rather well when he said, 'Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.' In other words, focusing on both the qualities and the interests of others before those of oneself. American author summed it nicely – 'It is far more impressive when others discover your good qualities without your help.' So it is not about putting yourself down, rather than building others up.

Let's get back to Jesus, and I want to make two points. Firstly, Jesus understood the power of humility so well. He is telling us that humility is about acknowledging and respecting the rights and worth of others, and not thinking of ourselves as more important or more worthy than others. And that if we can do this, ironically we are well on the way to being respected and being considered worthy persons by others.

Secondly, Jesus came into the world in very humble circumstances, and I believe this only served to enhance the impact he had on the world. Has there been any leader in history in the same mould as

Jesus? I don't think so. Not only has he made an impact on the world that no other person could hope to emulate, but his style of leadership, his *modus operandi*, is unparalleled for someone whose influence has impinged on so many generations. It is a leadership shaped by service. And that calls for a significant degree of humility.

Tim Tebow, one of the best-known players in the recent history of American college football, a Christian and outstanding role model for today's youth, said, 'We have to humble ourselves, and the way to do that is by serving other people.' For me, one of the most powerful and meaningful images of Jesus's ministry, was him kneeling in front of his disciples as he washed their feet, a task usually carried out by a slave. This was a direct call to service to us all. The actual washing of the feet was symbolic of service.

'And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.' *John 13:14-15*.

'Do as I have done to you!' You can't get much more direct than that! So let's do it.

Reverend Warner Wilder