

Sermon 1 September 2019 Humility

Luke 14:1, 7-14

This has to be one of my favourite passages in the Bible, and that is largely because of the wonderful and so very important message of humility that it contains. That is the first half of the reading, the second half is really about our church, but I will come back to that shortly. Jesus tells his listeners that, when attending a wedding feast, rather than head for a seat at the head of the table, they should go and sit at the foot of the table, a more humble position. He makes the point that invariably if you do that, you will be asked to move to a more important position. In other words, those that humble themselves will always be lifted up. This is actually a fact of life and is really what humility is all about.

It needs to be noted that once again Jesus is having a dig at the Pharisees because they always liked to be seated at the head of the table; that's where they considered themselves to belong, but they certainly did not garner respect for that, and in fact, quite the contrary.

It is really interesting that humility gives a person mana. If you don't consider yourself to be better than others, people will automatically respect you for that, and in their eyes you are lifted up. It should be mentioned that mana is not something you seek for yourself but rather it is something given to you by others. The minute you attribute mana to yourself, you have lost it. That is why humility and mana go hand in hand.

Humility can only exist in relation to others. It is a matter of seeing others in a positive light in comparison to ourselves. It is not a case of putting yourself down so much as lifting others up. I remember reading in a book about Francis of Assisi how one of his followers came across Francis praying aloud and he was lamenting that he was nothing but a worm. Now, it could be argued that he was suffering from a serious bout of lack of self-esteem, but in reality what he was doing was comparing himself to God, and if we really believe that God is the almighty creator of absolutely everything, then it is probably quite appropriate to equate ourselves with a worm. And let's remember that when it comes to soil fertility and the soil's ability to grow anything, a worm is a highly beneficial agent in that process. So it is not all bad!

Now this does raise a very important point, and that is, faith in God does call for a degree of humility. My faith means that I need God, I am dependent on God, I am lost without God. It means that I am nothing without God, and that is exactly where St Francis was coming from. It means that any success or gifts we might have, we attribute them directly to God rather than taking the credit ourselves.

One of the wonderful things about the great Billy Graham is that he always gave credit to God. Thousands and thousands of people gathered to hear him and thousands were led to a relationship with Christ thanks to him, but he never ever would accept any credit at all. According to him God was the only one who should receive the credit – he was merely the messenger.

Most of you would know the name Samuel Morse. He is best remembered for his invention of the single-wire telegraph system and the co-inventor of the Morse code. Samuel Morse was born into a preacher's home in New England just two years after George Washington was elected the first president of the United States. After finishing his education at Yale, he went to England to hone his painting skill. Upon his return to America he was recognized as a gifted artist and was soon in much demand. Morse's first wife died while he was away from home painting in Washington, D.C. In his heartbreak he turned away from painting and began trying to develop a means of rapid communication over great distances. This eventually led to his discovery of the telegraph.

Despite his fame and the many honours that came his way, Morse wasn't proud or boastful. In a letter to his second wife he wrote, *"The more I contemplate this great undertaking, the more I feel my own littleness, and the more I perceive the hand of God in it, and how He has assigned to various persons their duties, He being the great controller, all others His honoured instruments.... Hence our dependence first of all on God, then on each other."*

Then there is the story of King Canute. The name could well conjure up for you an image of him sitting on a throne in the sea, the waves lapping around his throne. Let me explain.

King Canute ruled over Denmark, Norway, and England more than one thousand years ago. A wise ruler, he worked diligently to make the lives of his subjects better. As is often the case, he was surrounded by those who sought to gain influence and prominence with him, and according to the ancient story, he grew tired of their continual flattery and determined to put an end to it. He ordered that his throne be carried out to the seashore and gathered his courtiers about it.

As he sat on his throne in the sea, the king commanded the tide not to come in. Yet soon the waters were lapping around his legs as the tide did not heed him. According to one historian's

account, King Canute rose up from his throne and said, *“Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom Heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws.”*

So once again, there is the message of understanding and accepting our very humble place in relation to God.

I want to briefly look at the second part of our gospel reading in which Jesus tells his host that instead of inviting family, friends and his rich neighbours, because they can actually repay you by inviting you back, he should be inviting the poor and the outcasts. There is an unmistakable element of service implied here. To serve is to manifest humility. There is no more vivid demonstration of this than when Jesus washed his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper. This was essentially a servant’s task but Jesus challenged his disciples to follow his example. *‘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.’* Luke 13:14-15. What he saying to them is that they must be prepared to take on the humble role of a servant and to serve. If we are to be genuine followers of Christ, we must be prepared to do the same.

Just as a humorous aside, well-known Biblical scholar, Tom Wright, was preaching on this passage, giving special emphasis on ‘inviting the poor and the outcasts to dinner.’ The next week he and his wife received no less than three invitations to dinner from people who were in the congregation that day. He wasn’t too sure which category they fitted into – the poor or the outcasts!

I want to finish by making this point: I believe this passage gives us something of a guide in terms of what our church should look like. Now, not for one moment do I believe that family, friends and wealthy neighbours should not be invited to be part of our church, heaven forbid! But I do believe the point is that our church must embrace all and sundry, reaching across social, cultural and even faith barriers. However, you have probably heard me go on about that enough just recently, so I will leave it at that.

Now for the very final note on humility, there is the story of the vicar who resigned in order to move to another parish. He was approached by an endearing member of the congregation who wept and said, ‘Things will never be the same.’ The minister tried to console her by saying, ‘Don’t worry, I’m confident you will get a new vicar who is better than me.’

She continued to sob and replied, ‘That’s what the last three vicars have said, but they just keep getting worse.’

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