

Sermon Christmas Day 2023

There are many elements to the Nativity story and an element I would like to focus on this morning is humility. The conditions in which Jesus was born were unquestionably humble. Being born in a stable, surrounded by animals with the accompanying smells – you can't get much more humble than that!

There has to be a message here. Well, there is a message, as there is with everything about Jesus, and his birth is no exception. I mean, here is the birth of a man who was going to reshape how we view God, a man whose life would impact on the music, art, literature and architecture of the world, let alone the spiritual lives of millions of people, and he was born in a very humble stable, for goodness sake! Incredible.

And who were the first people to receive the news of this life-changing birth? Shepherds going about their very mundane job of looking after sheep. In terms of career choice, shepherding would have to rate quite highly on the humility barometer. That is not to demean shepherding for one minute. After all, I was one myself for many years, and I suppose you could say I have continued to be so. It's just that the nature of the flock I oversee has changed somewhat. But there is no doubt that in those days, shepherds were not considered to be in the upper echelon of society.

So what is the message here for us? Simply this, humility is something very meaningful, and actually quite powerful. What is humility? Humility is being free from pride and arrogance. I would venture to use the word 'subservient', because one of the main meanings of subservient is 'serving as a means to an end,' and there is definitely an element of service associated with humility. Being prepared to serve others is humble. Jesus demonstrated this so beautifully in his washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. This was the duty of a servant, but Jesus was telling his disciples that unless they were prepared to carry out such a task, a task associated with servants, they were not ready to be leaders in the creation of his Church.

There are many styles of leadership, but if we are to take the word of Jesus, the most effective and appropriate style of leadership is servant leadership.

Humility gives a person mana. There is a story about US President, Ronald Reagan. When he was Governor of California, he sometimes slipped out of his office early, telling his administrator, Michael Deaver, 'I've a few errands to run.'

Deaver became curious, so he leafed through the 'to read' file on the governor's desk. On top was a wrinkled letter from a man stationed in Vietnam. The soldier had written to Reagan telling him about his life in Vietnam and how much he missed his wife. That particular day was their wedding anniversary and he wanted her to know how much he loved her and longed to be with her. Although he had already sent her a card, he asked the

governor if he would make a phone call to make sure she was ok and pass on his love in case she didn't receive his card.

The next day, Deaver discovered Reagan had done much more than what the soldier had requested. He had picked up a dozen red roses and delivered them personally to the man's wife. Reagan's driver told Deaver that Reagan approached the woman with an extremely humble attitude and offered the flowers on behalf of a loving husband stationed in a jungle hell on the other side of the world. He then spent over an hour with her, drinking coffee and talking about her family. Reagan's humility was, in fact, one of the secrets to his enduring popularity.

One of the great enduring qualities of Nelson Mandela was undoubtedly his humility. No person in recent history has had the mana of that man.

In terms of leaders, no one has had an impact on the world that can in any way compare with that of Jesus Christ. And no one could have had a humble entry into the world that can compare with that of Christ. There is certainly a message there for us.

John Ruskin, 19th century English writer and philosopher, wrote, *'I believe the first test of a truly great man is in his humility.'*

If you want to be in God's good books, Proverbs 3:34 states, *'The Lord shows favour to the humble.'*

The final word goes to Peter who writes in 1 Peter 5:5-7, *'And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.'*

Today as we celebrate Christ's birth, we acknowledge the nature and humble circumstances of his birth, because this signals the nature of his leadership, a leadership that has seen no equal and style of leadership which we, in our very limited way, need to try and emulate.

Rev Warner Wilder