

## Sermon 22 September 2024 Humility in Service

### James 3:13-18 Mark 9:30-37

I want to focus on the sentence from our gospel reading where Jesus says, *'Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.'* But before I do, a quick word on the opening paragraph of this passage where Jesus says, *"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."* But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.'

It's not the only time Jesus talks about his impending fate and subsequent triumph, but the disciples just couldn't get their head around it. It was just too much to comprehend. Yes, they might well have come to realise that he was indeed the Messiah but their belief and understanding of the Messiah certainly did not comprise being crucified like a criminal and then rising from the dead. That was just a bridge too far. It was a bit like being told that a chef was going to create a wedding banquet from a few slices of bread and a hunk of cheese. In other words, impossible! Beyond comprehension. Easy for us, we read his words with the benefit of history in hindsight, but for them, it was a different story, and even when Jesus was crucified, they still couldn't comprehend what was going on, but that is for another time.

So, back to the words of Jesus, *'Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.'* Jesus is making a statement about humility and service, and I think what he is saying here is that if we want to be respected as good Christians, as good citizens, then we need to consider the interests of others before those of ourselves. C S Lewis put it very well when he said, *'Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking more of yourself less.'* In other words, our focus should be not on ourselves, but on others.

Humility has invariably been one of the characteristics of great people. There are exceptions. Muhammed Ali 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, some of you will have heard of Thomas Hardy, one of the great English poets. When 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 a stamped and addressed envelope for the return of the 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*.

This word *mana* is interesting in itself. There is no appropriate English word which can adequately reflect the meaning of *mana*, which, of course, is why the word has been integrated into the New Zealand English language. A person with *mana* is someone we look up to and 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 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 a king. Why should you take off your crown?'

The king said to his ministers, 'You fools, do you think I wish to appear inferior to an ordinary person? He is humble. 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 king, I should try to be better than everybody in everything. That is why I took off my crown.' Now that is a very wise king. He understood not only the true meaning of humility, but also the undoubted significance and impact of humility.

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

The other point concerns service. Jesus aligns humility with service: *'Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.'* He emphasises this in Matthew 23:11-12: *'The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'* Surely, no other person in the history of our world has made an impact to the extent that Jesus has, and his style of leadership, his modus operandi, is a leadership shaped by service. And that calls for a significant degree of humility.

For me, one of the most powerful images of Jesus's ministry is him kneeling in front of his disciples as he washed their feet, a task usually carried out by a servant. This is a direct call to service to us all. *'And since I, the Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. Do as I have done to you.'* John 13:14-15. James makes this point in our first reading: *'If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.'*

As we have so often said, we should always be prepared to make small sacrifices that will be of benefit to others; we should never consider ourselves to be above the carrying out of the smallest of tasks, especially if the welfare of others is at stake. Let me share another story.

There once was a very wealthy and curious king. This king had a huge boulder placed in the middle of a road. Then he hid nearby to see if anyone would try to remove the gigantic rock from the road. The first people to pass by were some of the king's wealthiest merchants and courtiers. Rather than moving it, they simply walked around it. They were far too important to attend to such a menial task as moving a boulder. Not one of them tried to move the boulder.

Finally, a peasant came along. His arms were full of vegetables. When he got near the boulder, rather than simply walking around it as the others had, the peasant put down his load and tried to move the stone to the side of the road. It took a lot of effort but he finally succeeded. The peasant gathered up his load and was ready to go on his way when he saw a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The peasant opened the purse. The purse was stuffed full of gold coins and a note from the king. The king's note said the purse's gold was a reward for moving the boulder from the road.

If we are prepared to practise humble service, we will be rewarded.