

Sermon 24 August 2025 Humility

Philippians 2:1-4 Luke 14:1,7-14

I love this gospel passage, largely because of the wonderful and so very important message of humility 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. *'When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the seat of honour. Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table.'* Luke 14:8. He makes the point that invariably if you do that, you will be asked to move to a more important position. *'Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, "Friend, we have a better place for you." Then you will be honoured in front of all the other guests.'* Luke 14:10. 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 invariably respect you for that, and in their eyes you are lifted up. It should be mentioned that mana is not something you seek or claim for yourself, 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. Or another way of looking at it is as CS Lewis said, *'Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.'* I remember reading in a book about St Francis of Assisi how one of his followers came upon Francis praying aloud and he was lamenting that he was nothing but a worm. Now, it could be argued that Francis was suffering from a serious bout of lack of self-esteem, but in reality what he was doing was comparing himself with God, and if we believe that God is the mighty Creator of absolutely everything, then it is quite appropriate to equate ourselves with a worm. However, let's remember that when it comes to soil fertility and the soil's ability to grow anything, a worm is actually a highly beneficial agent in the 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 significant degree of humility. My faith means that I am dependent on God, I am lost without God. *'Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is your rock.'* Isaiah 26:4. What this really means is that we are nothing without God, and that is exactly where Francis of Assisi was coming from. Any success or gifts we might have, we attribute them directly to God.

One of the wonderful things about the great Billy Graham is that he always gave credit to God. Thousands upon thousands of people gathered to hear him and thousand 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, USA. After finishing his education at Yale, he went to England to hone his painting skills. Upon returning to America, he was recognised as a gifted artist and was soon in much demand. Morse's first wife died while he was away from home painting in Washington. In his heartbreak he turned away from painting and began to develop a means of rapid communication over great distances. This eventually led to the 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 God's hand 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.'

This anecdote emphasises the point that we are dependent on God, that our faith means exactly that. This calls for a degree of humility, but we will be lifted up. Jesus makes this point in this passage. We hear the same message in 1 Peter 5:6: '*So humble yourselves under the almighty power of God, and in his time, he will honour you.*' And if you want further confirmation, I quote from James 4:10, '*Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.*'

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 him by inviting him back, he should be inviting the poor and the outcasts: '*Then he turned to his host. "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbours. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the lame and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."*' Luke 14:12-14.

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 and then challenged them to follow his example. That was a very humble thing to do, a task usually assigned to servants. But as Jesus said, '*I have given you an example to follow.*' Luke 13:15.

Just as a humorous aside, a 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 just want to reiterate a point I have recently made on more than one occasion. 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 friends and wealthy neighbours should not be invited to be part of our church, heaven forbid! But I do believe Jesus is emphasising the point that we must embrace all and sundry, reaching across social, cultural and even faith barriers. However, you have heard me go on about that enough recently, so I will say no more.

I finish by emphasising the both the importance and need for humility. Humility pervades and shapes our attitude in a myriad of ways. Take judging for example. When we judge someone, we are forsaking humility because we are in effect perceiving that person as being inferior to us in a particular way. It actually says a lot about us. Someone said, '*Judging a person does not define who they are... It defines who you are.*'

I quote from our first reading: '*Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves.*' Philippians 2:3. And a very good take is offered by a Japanese proverb: '*If you understand everything, you must be misinformed.*'

Now for a 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 church who wept and said, 'Things will never be the same.' The minister tried to console her by saying, 'Don't worry. I'm sure 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.'