

## **Ambition**

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Dr Mark Butchers* on the 1<sup>st</sup> September, at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 8.00am and 10.00am.

Luke, ch. 14, vv. 1 and 7-14.

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It is a very familiar, quintessentially human, scene isn't it? There is Jesus invited to dinner at the house of a leading Pharisee – probably invited to test him out, see what he was made of, how he might or might not fit in. Jesus surveys the scene: a group – no doubt all men – intensely aware of their place in the pecking order, but trying to climb the greasy pole a little higher. There's great jockeying for position, elbows out and sharpened as the doors open and the rush is on for the most important seats next to the most important people.

It does not take too much of a leap of imagination to transpose that scene to a modern-day cocktail party, perhaps in the City of London. Bright, ambitious young people networking like mad, being seen with the important people, getting noticed, getting ahead.

I am not a regular viewer of *The Apprentice*, but it does have a strangely hypnotic and magnetic attraction, even though its whole ethos seems largely repellent. When I have watched it, it seems to me to encourage a dog-eat-dog approach to business. There is teamwork certainly, but at the heart of it is the desire to be the one who stands out in the team, the one who gets noticed and praised – and eventually of course hired not fired. The knives are not far below the surface at any time, and sometimes very visible and very sharp indeed.

Jesus's reaction to its modern-day equivalents seems to me to cut through all this. The guests at the dinner were probably watching to see where he would sit – where would he place himself in the pecking order? And his advice conveyed in the parable is to go for the lowest seat: do not go in for self-promotion; do not jockey for position. Exercise humility and then allow your host to choose where you should sit.

There are a number of stories and incidents in the Gospels which revolve around ambition and where people come in the hierarchy. Usually they involve the Scribes and Pharisees and Jesus roundly condemns them for what he sees as their lack of humility: ["Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!" (Mark 12.38)] But it is also a live issue even within the twelve disciples.

Towards the end of Jesus's ministry, after they have sat at his feet for several years, James and John ask Jesus for a favour – to sit at his right hand and his left in his glory. And Jesus does indeed put them in their place but not quite in the way they hoped: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." (Mark 10.43 and 44). Jesus's constant refrain – and it is said on several occasions – is "the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Whoever seeks to preserve their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it". He teaches a completely different way: the down-to-earth way of humility, and indeed the word humility comes from 'humus' the Latin word for earth.

He not only teaches humility, but models it – born in a stable, living simply in ordinary surroundings, not in silks and palaces, resisting the temptations offered him of power and dominion, washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. This is no false humility. It is not

Uriah Heap humility “I am well aware that I am the ‘umblest person going ... ‘umble we are, ‘umble we have been, ‘umble we ever shall be” (Dickens David Copperfield). No, it is humility at the core of his being.

This was picked up by one way of understanding Christ which became popular in the late 19th Century. This was based on Kenosis – the Greek word for emptying. Theologians focused on that wonderful passage in Philippians 2 which says that though he was in the form of God, Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross”. They argued that when the Son of God came amongst us and was born as a human being, he voluntarily laid aside at least some of his almighty powers and omniscience in order to become fully human. The mighty Creator emptied himself to become incarnate in Jesus, ready to serve, take the lowest seat, wash feet.

Whatever the theology – and many theologians do not accept God emptied himself in this way – whatever the theology, the example of humility Jesus sets us, stands. It is quite clear that he expects us to try to follow in his steps:

“... among the Gentiles ... their rulers lord it over them ... but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:42-43).

Now I do not think we should ever underestimate the difficulty of this. I suspect there is something engrained in at least part of us, through the long processes of evolution, which is about self-preservation, looking after Number One, an inbuilt survival instinct, that means that putting others first, serving them, taking the path of humility, does not necessarily come easily. Obviously it is a complex picture: parents for instance will often put the interests, even survival, of their children above their own. Soldiers courageously lay down their lives to save their comrades. But even so I am not sure that servanthood, the path of humility, is our default mode. We have to work at it – or perhaps better, we have to co-operate with the Holy Spirit pulling us in that direction away from me-first self-preservation instincts. Following Jesus’s example will never be easy.

So what does all this have to say to ambitious young things in the City and to us as Christians about the relationship between humility and ambition?

I remember when I was a curate in the late 1980’s a colleague of mine, a clergywoman was asked about ambition in a Question-and-Answer session. This was before women could be priests. She was asked: “Is there room for ambition in the church?” To which she instantly replied “not if you’re a woman”. We are still wrestling with that issue now over women bishops.

But does Jesus’s example of humility mean that Christians should see ambition as sinful? Should we be shunning it? It is a difficult one: on the one hand we have this morning’s Gospel encouraging us to take the lower seats. On the other hand we have parables about not hiding our light under a bushel and making the best use of our talents.

Probably the best way to balance these things is to reflect about our motivation and the end we have in view. If we are ambitious purely for our own gain, self-promotion, personal profit, then perhaps we might find Jesus criticizing us as he criticized the Pharisees. If, on the other hand, we have a wider end in view – by applying for this job or this role I can offer my gifts

and experience for the benefit of my community, my church, God's kingdom, then my hunch is Jesus would give that his blessing.

Alongside this, there is the importance of calling. If a number of people are saying to you – you really ought to think about doing that – come and sit here – then that may be a divine hand upon your shoulder.

Let me finish with a story and a saying.

The story is a true one, which I have told before. A friend of mine was once organizing a clergy conference in New Zealand. On the last night he asked for help to clean the loos early the following morning. He got up and went along at 6 o'clock wondering who would be there. To his surprise, there was the Archbishop of New Zealand already hard at it, mop in hand. He had been called up higher, but was obviously still imbued with a spirit of humility. We are never too exalted to clean loos in the Kingdom. If Jesus can wash feet, we can clean loos!

And the reflection, from the Jewish Talmud: human beings were created on the sixth day, so that they could not be boastful since they came after fleas in the order of creation. Amen.