

Humility

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 20th September 2009

Mark 9.30-37

After leaving the mountain ³⁰Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, '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.' ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

As I was pondering the readings set for this morning, one word kept coming into my mind, the word HUMILITY, as it seemed to emerge as a theme especially in the NT reading and the Gospel.

In the first section of the Gospel reading, Jesus is talking just to his disciples, giving them the second prediction of his passion, telling them that the Son of Man will be betrayed, killed, and, through that suffering, will finally be vindicated - the ultimate example of obedience and humility. The suffering of Christ is crucial to his supreme act of Salvation. And the disciples are, understandably, both distressed and incapable of understanding what he is saying, let alone what it means.

Maybe we too, like the disciples, fail to see how necessary it was for Christ to go through suffering in order to fulfill his mission of salvation for the whole world. And maybe, as we try to follow in his footsteps, we too fail to understand that any suffering we have to go through may also be necessary for our salvation. Instinctively, we focus much more on the comfort, the guidance and the fulfillment of living in the all encompassing love of God, and choose to forget that, still surrounded by that love, we will, at some point in our lives, be challenged by suffering. Will we fight it? Accept it? Use it? Shall we grow closer to God through it – or shall we be utterly crushed by it?

The disciples, in this story, have completely failed to grasp the true significance of what it means to be a follower of the crucified one. Then, in their misunderstanding, they begin to argue about which of them will be the greatest. And when challenged about this by Jesus, they are ashamed, and remain silent, giving us a most unflattering view of their faith and knowledge of Jesus.

So Jesus very patiently sits down, calls them to him and explains that whoever wants to be the first in his kingdom must be the last and be the servant of all. Turning their perceptions, their preconceived ideas upside down. Then to illustrate what he is saying to them, Jesus takes a little child and says to them "whoever welcomes such a child welcomes me".

In our society today children are precious, protected and seen of greatest value. (We have heard a lot this week in the news about the proposed extension of 'vetting and barring' of people who

come into regular contact with children.) But in Christ's time the opposite was true. Children were seen as the least significant members of society – of little importance. A child was of low status and lower value in those days. And the disciples were being called not to be great, but to be servants; and the object of their service was to be a child - the least important people of all. So what Jesus is saying to them is that all they have regarded as valuable and honoured in their society is being called into question, and that their values are to be totally reversed in his kingdom.

In the words of our New Testament reading (James 3.13-4.3,7-8a), we are called to be wise and understanding; and our service is to be done with gentleness born of wisdom. We are called in short to service and humility – to be humble before God. We are to draw nearer to Christ by 'submitting ourselves before God.'

So taken together, from these readings we learn that we are to be servants of the lowest and to submit to God. In short, we are to learn humility. But what might we actually mean by humility? It is certainly not, in the words of the psalmist "I am a worm and no man". We are all of immense value to God, we are all precious. While we may fail and fail again, we are still of immense value and always loved. And neither is true humility constantly groveling to everyone else, and being "ever so 'umble' like Uriah Heap.

No, I believe that true humility is being totally subject to God in everything, acknowledging our utter dependence upon God, even for life itself, and handing over all control to him; acknowledging that we are nothing, and can do nothing, without him.

As its root implies, the word 'humility' is 'of the earth'. The earth is always there, taken for granted, rarely remembered as we go about our lives, and trodden on by everyone. It is open to whatever falls onto it - sunshine and rain – and receives whatever seeds are sown in it. And yet it is from this earth that life blossoms. So, following that line of thought, true humility is to receive whatever comes our way – be it to be taken for granted, rained on, trodden on. And yet, it is to receive the seed of the God within us; that will yield a rich harvest if we let it.

This humility, this dependence, is not something that can be cultivated deliberately, but comes from a growing awareness of God – in the words of the Epistle again: "of drawing nearer to God that he might draw nearer to us." For it is when we confess that we have nothing that we haven't received, when we admit our insufficiency and dependence on God, that we might begin to become genuine servants of others. It is not until we are empty of self that we can be filled with God's spirit. Can God find room in a heart that is already full of 'self'?

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it cannot bear fruit. Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. Unless we practice humility, we cannot be true servants of one another. We cannot truly welcome the lowest of the low – the child in our Gospel reading – until we truly acknowledge that without God, we can do nothing.

St Paul recognised his dependence on God with the words: *For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing* (Romans 7.19). Paul's words demonstrate our human tendency to pursue self-will and not the will of God, even when we know this to be the case. Paul was a powerful, independent and influential individual. But in his heart he came to realise his utter dependence on God. It is this dependence that is a profound challenge to our

own age where low self-esteem is seen to be a sort of illness - and therefore to be seen to be dependent in our day and age is totally counter cultural; where the term 'image' is one of the key phrases associated with 'self-actualisation', 'profile', 'appearance'. God-given humility is the complete opposite of this.

A story which I find really helpful when thinking of serving others in the spirit of humility is the story of St Martin. The story goes that as he was riding along the road richly dressed on his fine horse, he come across a beggar with no cloak. He got off his horse, and instead of just giving him his cloak he tore the cloak in half - half for the beggar and half for himself. So, by doing this he put himself in the same position as the beggar – not above him as a benefactor, not beneath him by going cold himself – either of which would have demanded that the beggar was beholden to him in some way. By putting himself in the same position, the beggar's pride and value was undented.

So how might we in today's world actually learn to serve each other in true humility? In a recent Church Times, there was a transcript of an interview with Rowan Williams in which he was asked: "What is the gospel for today? What is the good news for the 21st Century – for someone, say, this very day who is facing house repossession. Or for an elderly neighbour who is heartbroken that her husband has dementia and can no longer live with her? How can you, for these people, put together the theology and the reality?"

And Rowan replies: "the good news in those situations is, first and foremost, that you are of immeasurable value. God looks at you with such delight and such hope that you couldn't imagine it. And that means that even the smallest decision you make for love rather than fear, is of immeasurable value. We let God in by doing just the smallest thing. The smallest turning to the light can make more difference than you can possibly believe."

So, I believe, by the same token, the smallest act of humility, of allowing God to fill us, of allowing God to take control, can be of immense significance.

But then the other side of humility is, of course, pride – when we put ourselves first, when we regard ourselves as more important than anyone else, either by belittling them or by denying them the value that God has for them, or by ignoring their opinions because we know that we are in the right. Pride might therefore be defined as always putting the 'me' before the 'us'. In the words of our Epistle: "It is when we have bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, and lack humility, that conflicts and disputes come among us."

The world, and sadly the Church, are filled with conflicts and disputes. Through fear, greed and pride, through lack of humility and lack of valuing of the other, come distrust, wars, divisions, poverty. There are endless examples. Is it greed for power, and maybe oil, that leads to wars in the Middle East? Is it because we in the West know that we are always right - and therefore have superior rights over others- that leads us to hold on to our nuclear weapons, while preventing nations we do not trust to develop them? Is it because one section of the Church knows that their interpretation of Scripture, their view of homosexuality or women Bishops, is the right one that the Church is divided and driven into conflict and agonies of disunity? Is it because we are more important than those in the developing world, that we neglect to really share our wealth, that we neglect to change our lifestyle to protect our planet? Is it because

every member of a family stands up for their individual 'rights', that families fall apart and children suffer?

If we live our lives in the belief that we are more important, more influential, of more valued status than others, then we are so full of self that there is no room for God, let alone other people. It is the call to humility that demands that we let go of all these things; that we relinquish control of our lives to God; that we live for our neighbour, whoever that may be, not ourselves; that we let go of our pride and our rights, and let God work through us; that we learn to look at the world through his eyes with his values, and to work towards his kingdom, to long for a world where our social conventions are turned upside down and the values of our contemporary society are totally reversed.

Of course it takes a lifetime to even get to the foothills of reaching this state of true dependence on God – of true humility. And it is a dependence that relies on having true and unshakable trust and faith in Him. But let us, this morning, at least pray for the faith and grace to accept God's gift offered to us, of at least 'wanting to want' to walk the path of true obedience and service, of true humility. Amen.