

Weybridge Methodist Church

Sunday 2nd November 2014

SERMON

Matt 23, v 12: For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

I'd like us to ponder these words of Jesus for a few minutes this morning, and particularly to think what it means to be humble. Humility isn't popularly thought of as an attractive virtue, indeed, in our celebrity-obsessed culture, it's probably not considered a virtue at all in a world much more interested in the doings of famous entertainers, at least some of whom are a bit short of talent but rather gifted when it comes to self-publicity.

And it seems that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were also pretty gifted when it came to self-publicity. It's not surprising that they were so often the butt of Jesus' scorching criticism, when you consider their behaviour. They simply weren't content to be the contemporary religious experts, advising the people on the minutiae of their faith in accordance with the doctrines they had developed. They saw themselves as leaders who were a cut above ordinary mortals, as people with a special hold on God's affection, who therefore wanted to make a very public display of their religion, to impress others with how grand and important they were. And they're smart enough to be just a bit subtle about how they show off. The religious artefacts they carry around with them are just a bit bigger than anyone else's – and the tassels on their garments are just a bit longer than everyone else's. Just enough showing off to make impressionable onlookers believe that these are very important and special people before God.

Before I retired I was spending quite a bit of time in America, and with the jet lag, I would often find myself awake in my hotel room at odd hours of the night. In a usually vain attempt to get myself back to sleep, I would channel hop on the in-room TV and in so doing stumbled across the channels devoted to the so-called televangelists, as often as not shouty, overbearing individuals, laden with gold jewellery, apparently on the same kind of ego trip as those Pharisees 2,000 years ago. I'm sure they weren't all like that, but the evidence shows that some of these latter day preachers were very much in for themselves, feathering their nests with the generous donations from their nationwide congregations, and, on closer examination, leading lives which seem to fall along way short of what you might expect for such important, or rather self-important, people.

No wonder the arrogance and pride of the Pharisees provokes this comment from Jesus about humility. But what does it mean to be a humble Christian, particularly for those of us who exercise some sort of leadership, whether at work or in church? Let's think about the nature of humility this morning, given that this is not a subject you'll likely to hear being discussed in society at large.

It's probably easiest to begin by identifying behaviour which isn't humble. Some types of behaviour are obvious, some may surprise you.

As we've already noted, showing off about yourself is not being humble, whether this is about who you are or what you have. Self-importance, vanity, self-glorification, over-weening pride have no place in the life of the Christian. I remember a Minister of one of the churches I've attended was always talking about himself in his sermons (and yes it was a he), what he'd been doing, where he'd been, with no hint of any self-criticism in what he was saying about himself. This made me very uneasy.

When I first started preaching many moons ago, I was given a piece of advice to pass on to my congregations, and I do so pass it on now, both to you and to Neil at the beginning of his journey towards becoming a Local Preacher. It's this: if you, sitting in the pew, are getting bored by the preacher's sermon, you can play a game called sermon cricket. Basically it's like ordinary cricket, in that the preacher scores a run every time he uses the words, God, Jesus or Holy Spirit. But you in the congregation take a wicket every time he uses the words, I, me, my or mine. I commend it to you as an exercise if the preacher's boring you. In fact you may be playing it right now. Self-absorption isn't healthy for us as Christians. Time saved not talking about ourselves is time gained for one another and for God.

And closely linked with this is placing importance on rank and status and hierarchies, which Jesus condemns, and which is not behaving humbly. When I was first in the Civil Service, it was a bit like the

military in that your entitlements were determined strictly by your rank. At that time one of the most prized possessions in your office was a hat stand, but you were only entitled to that at a certain grade or above. If you were too junior, you had to make do with the top of your filing cabinet. Jesus is quite radical about this. If you're obsessed with your rank, if you think the way to commanding respect is to give yourself airs and graces, then that's not behaving humbly. Away with ranks and titles says Jesus.

So far, so straightforward. I think we would all agree that swaggering self-importance, self-aggrandisement, is the very opposite of humility. But there are some other behaviour characteristics which we might think of as humble behaviour, but which in my mind are not. And this deserves to be said because sometimes we can be held back in our Christian witness, in the exercise of our Christian duties, in the fulfilment of our Christian vocation, because we're confused about what humility is and isn't.

Let me be more specific: humility is not the same as being passive or silent or reticent. Humility doesn't necessarily mean being quiet, or inactive. I'm afraid that if you asked the man or woman on the street what they thought how a humble person behaves, they might well say that it's being wet and ineffectual and never saying boo to a goose. Let me say emphatically that a church which isn't engaged in society, but which rather believes its first duty is never to give offence, isn't being humble. It's just being, frankly, cowardly. Being humble doesn't mean keeping quiet all the time, while society goes to hell in a handcart. A collective shrug of Christian shoulders isn't being humble, that's rather a failure of discipleship. When the church has stayed quiet and let evil prosper, that not's being humble, that about a lack of courage. You can see that's what happened in the churches in Germany in the run-up to the Second World War, failing to speak out about the barbarism of the Nazis as they rose to power. Or closer to home, it is an abomination that the church was not more energetic in its identification of paedophiles amongst the clergy and the protection of young people from serious harm at their hands. Failing to denounce evil has got nothing to do with humility, and everything to do with lack of courage.

In summary then, humility isn't about self-obsession or self-glorification or about keeping quiet in the face of evil. So then what is it that will make and keep us humble?

I think humility in us starts by reflecting on the nature of our relationship with God, as embodied in Jesus. Let's begin by acknowledging that if there is anything of worth in us, it comes from God alone. There's really no room for pride or vanity in our lives if we accept that all good things come from God, they're not generated within us by dint of our own efforts. We all start at the same place in life, at the foot of the Cross. All goodness is a gift of a merciful God who gives us everything, not because we deserve it, but in spite of the fact that we don't, in spite of the fact that we crucify Christ anew each day. In the words of Isaac Watts' great hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

No pride, no boasting, no vanity, because of what God has done for us, what Jesus has done for us. We should be humbled when we reflect on what God has done for us. Humility is the only justifiable response from us to God.

And this leads on to something else. We stand at the foot of the cross, and that's exactly where everyone else stands too. We're all in the same place in relation to God. So what reason can there be for lauding it over others, feeling superior to others, when all of us have the same need for God's forgiveness, for his blessings on our lives and for his love? How can we possibly reckon ourselves better than our neighbour, when there is nothing about ourselves which elevates us over them?

A spirit of humility recognises that we are all other sisters and brothers, who are of equal rank before God, sinners all who are loved alike by our Creator God.

Humility then is about our relationship between ourselves and God and between ourselves and our neighbours in Christ. Humility is a way of bearing ourselves, a way of behaving that recognises both our own poverty before God and our kinship with each other.

Now as I said I want to press on a bit further in this examination of humility, and consider how we can be humble leaders. Not all of us are called to be leaders, but many of us are leaders, whether at the workplace or because of the work we do in this church. How can you be a leader and remain humble? The question needs asking because I'm afraid to say that the church and church people haven't always given a good example of leadership when in a position of power and authority. I've mentioned already paedophile clergy who abused their position of power, misusing their authority for selfish and perverted ends. And history is littered with stories of church leaders who've misused their power, and done unspeakable things in the name of God. It was Lord Acton who observed that power tends to corrupt and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. It would be nice to think that the church had always used power more wisely but I'm afraid it's not always been so.

There is a report I came across of an experiment amongst a group of Christians. Three volunteers were put in a room and asked to debate a topical political issue. Two of them were asked to argue the pros and cons and the third was told to be a chairperson, whose job was to summarise the points made and evaluate their validity. After about 30 minutes refreshments were brought in, drinks and exactly five biscuits. What was observed was that the chairperson tended to take two of the biscuits for him or herself, without asking the other two first. It's a risk, when we're in any kind of position of power that we use that power for selfish purposes.

So how do those of us who hold leadership positions avoid that risk? I believe that our model of leadership has to be that of a servant, so that the way we exercise our leadership is free from abuse of power, free from coercion, and based on mutual respect for each other. The servant leader is there to empower, to encourage, to practice kindness and patience, to ensure that success is the success of the whole group, not just that of the leader.

I believe this really needs to be said. The church does need to stand up and lead, but it must do so in a spirit of service, not self-promotion. And the church desperately needs to grow leaders to see through the many tasks which it needs to undertake. So those of us who are called to lead need to think seriously about the type of leadership we are called to practice. Our leadership must not be about personal gain, making ourselves look big, or making others look small. Servant leadership is founded on humility.

And finally, given that this is the Sunday immediately following All Saints Day, let me leave you with this thought. I reckon that a key feature of all the saints you might think of has been humility. We might not agree on who are the saints, some of us might think of Mother Theresa or Desmond Tutu or Saint Francis of Assisi, but I suspect we wouldn't all agree that they all fit the bill. But I'm quite sure that each of us have had the privilege of knowing saintly people. They may not have been famous people but somehow they seemed to have shone with the light of Christ, in different ways they have had a profound influence on our own Christian journey. But whoever they may be, whether alive or dead, young or old, famous or not, I'm quite confident that one of the qualities that has most touched you has been their humility. Not that they would have necessarily recognised that gift within themselves. The truly humble never reckon themselves to be humble. But we have seen it in them. In their bearing towards others, in their posture before God, their humility has struck us forcefully.

And what is true of the saints is true of Jesus too. If ever anyone embodied the image of the humble servant, it's the Son of God himself. If you want to come close to God, practice humility. Humble yourself if you want in due time to be exalted. Humble yourself if you want to imitate the saints. Humble yourself if you want to be like Jesus. Humble yourself, and make yourself the servant of others.

Rob Gill