



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Trinity 17 2020 8.30 am

Ephesians 4.1-6 & Luke 14.1-11 (Sermon)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Just a few weeks ago, for the first time in 34 years of having the privilege to join two people together in marriage, a couple chose the Gospel reading we have just heard: Jesus in the home of a Pharisee noticing how people jostle to get the best seats at supper.

So, as was his wont, Jesus told the guests a parable: a parable about the need for ‘humility’ⁱ – better to be invited to sit in a choice seat than be asked to move out of one to make way for someone more important!

As is always the case when we read about food, or banquets, or weddings, or picnics on a hillside, in the Gospels, we, the reader, are meant to recognise the evangelists’ ‘shorthand’ and read ‘heaven’, ‘the heavenly banquet’ and ‘the Eucharist’ – the foretaste of the heavenly banquet Jesus.

In an age and a society where putting oneself forward is deemed a necessity, if not exactly a virtue (I am pretty sure that there is no-one here this morning who does not employ a team of publicists to manage their Facebook page, Instagram or Twitter account), what can Jesus’ parable on humility have to say to us today?

Of all the virtues and positive characteristics we have come to associate with Jesus, humility is the only one that he explicitly says we should learn from him: “*Learn of me that I am meek and humble of heart.*”ⁱⁱ

This 'humility' is not about weakness or allowing oneself to be exploited or put-down; nor is it about being trodden under foot or hiding one's gifts or abilities. It is rather that Jesus asks those who follow him to remember that their talents and abilities are all God-given gifts and must be regarded and used as such.

Humility might well be the most misunderstood and least appreciated of all the Christian Virtues. Whilst dictionaries might define 'humility' as 'having a low self-regard and sense of unworthiness', in Christian terms, humility is not the virtue of the weak or the oppressed, but the virtue of the rock-solid and the strong; the virtue of those who have learned that if one is alright-with-God, if one really is God's 'chosen and beloved', there is no need to seek the affirmation or the permission of a fickle, transient, shallow and fallen world.

Humility, is how the Christian man or woman expresses themselves to the world, knowing that all that we have comes from God and all that we can offer to others comes from this gift of God to us – even the gift of our very selves. We, as-we-are, not as-we-pretend-to-be. We, without the glossy packaging. We, warts and all – children of God, chosen and beloved, precious in God's eyes – no matter what others, what the world might think of us.

We, who know that we are secure in the fact that God has loved us into being; that God holds us in his love whilst we are alive; secure in the knowledge that, at the last, God will draw us, for all eternity, into the perfect Love that we name Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Thinking and believing like this, turns 'humility' into a virtue, a well-spring of positive action, not of stifled inaction; the spring of living water which empowers God's people to attempt - and to achieve - great things in the name of the One whose servants we are.

*'With God all things are possible'*ⁱⁱⁱ, says Jesus: with God, we can launch out into the deepest of waters, put down our nets and be assured of hauling in a great catch.

With God, we can walk across the roughest of stormy waters, place our hands into his hands and know that God will not allow us to sink.

This is the strong, courageous, dynamic, powerful life-changing, world-changing ‘humility’ Jesus advocates in the gospels and which he asks us to ‘learn’ from him.

Unlike the guests who jostle for the best seats at the wedding feast, we don’t have anything to prove to others, because we don’t have anything to prove to God who knows us better than we know ourselves, who looks not on our outward show but deep into our hearts.^{iv}

God knows us better than we know ourselves.

God loves us - not because of what we are or who we are or where we sit, or how many likes we get on our Facebook page or how many times our Instagram picture has been shared, but because God is, because God is Love, pure unbounded love, as Charles Wesley put it^v.

All *we* have to *do* is to drop our masks, come down off our self-erected pedestals and allow ourselves, by and through and with God’s grace, be just who God has made us to be, so that, at the last we might cast our crowns before him, be changed from glory into glory, take our place in heaven, and find ourselves consumed in wonder, love and praise.^{vi}

ⁱ Luke 14.7-11

ⁱⁱ Matthew 11.29

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 19.26

^{iv} cf 1Samuel 16.7

^v Love Divine, all loves excelling, C. Wesley (1707 – 1788)

^{vi} op cit. C. Wesley