

Culture of honour

Readings: Genesis 9:20 – 27, Matthew 11:25 – 30

Most of you will be aware that last week our parish rotated preachers with Waimea and Wakefield parishes. We did that because Martin and Allan and I decided we wanted to draw our parishes a bit closer. We want to get to know each other a bit better as part of the Nelson Anglican family. Getting to know each other better enables us to appreciate and respect each other a bit more.

It seems to me that when 'normal' people look at the Church as a whole, they have seen a lot of judgment and disrespect. They have labelled us as hypocritical and judgemental. In some cases we deserve those labels.

Around 1976, Kevin and I were newly married youth-leaders. A young couple from our youth group decided to move in together. Way back then that was scandalous. It wasn't helped by the fact that the boyfriend's family were long-standing and greatly respected church members – the shame that family felt was acute.

So what was the leadership to do about it? Two of the elders went to visit the couple. They gave them a serious telling off. They told them what a bad influence they were on the rest of the youth group etc. They told them they were no longer welcome at Sunday night worship as that was when the other young people mostly attended. They told them they couldn't come to youth group. They could come to Sunday morning church – here I am not sure if my memory is correct but I seem to remember that they were supposed to sit separately.

It was a very hard time for all of us – mostly for the young couple and their families. Kevin and I were also disempowered - it was all taken out of our hands.

The result was that the young couple left church permanently. Other young people still hung around with them and some of them left church too. The boyfriend's family was embarrassed and ashamed. The girlfriend's family had their thoughts of a judgemental church reinforced and continue to be bitter about it to this day.

It was a mess. Grace could have been offered. The young couple could have been offered restoration in an honourable way but none of that happened.

Today we begin a new preaching series called Culture of Honour. We are taking the themes from a book of the same name by Danny Silk. We won't be using the content of the book so much, as it is very specific to the US, but we will be considering the issues Mr Silk raises. Our aim is to continue growing as a place where Jesus is central; where we face issues honestly and lovingly and respect one another deeply.

We want to keep on growing as a community of Christ.. We grow when we are able to exercise our gifts – often we do that by trial and error. We grow when we honestly examine the challenges we face. We grow when we put the Lord first – individually and as a church. And we grow when we respect and honour each other.

We are doing all of those things already and yet there is always room for growth. My hope is that you will join with me and the other leaders in this journey respectfully making room for the other in our journey of life together.

I talked before about how 'normal' people, those outside the church, view us. Many Christian people also want nothing to do with the church. If they have anything to do with church it is on a very casual rather than as an actual commitment. Many attend church occasionally. Perhaps they are worried about being given a job that will suck all their energy and time. Perhaps they fear getting hurt because they've been hurt before. This place needs to be safe for the burned and burned out too.

Sometime back someone told me I was naïve. They said my faith was too simple; especially my faith in other people and that I would end up getting hurt. It is true, I have been hurt. And yet I choose to hold on to naïveté in relationship with others and with God too. I believe that the Lord loves me and everyone else and therefore it is up to me to think the best of everyone.

Jesus words about who God reveals himself to, the childlike, remind me that this is not wrong. The Lord often does things in ways that are contrary to our thinking. We think the well-educated, the powerful etc, are the ones who know what is what.

"No" Jesus says. The Father has revealed everything to the Son, to Jesus. Jesus in turn chooses to teach those who simply follow him; those who walk the Way with him.

Jesus wants to teach us. So let's be childlike and learn from him. Jesus is the one who wants to take our burdens from us – our hurts, our heavy loads, our shame, our guilt, our hang-ups, our troubles, our pain, our embarrassment – in fact he wants to take anything that prevents us from following him and being the community of faith we are called to be. The Lord's Spirit wants to break through in new ways in our midst.

Let's turn to the passage from Genesis. It's a short, grubby interlude in the life of an otherwise great man. By the way, how many short grubby interludes have most of us had in life? Most of us have things that we are ashamed of in our past somewhere; perhaps even in our present lives!

Let's not judge Noah for being a fallen human being but learn from the story. Noah gets drunk on the wine made from his own grapes. And there he is - showing more of himself than is decent. But remember this is in his tent – his private place. In comes Ham. Instead of immediately covering up his Dad, he goes to tell his brothers that Dad is naked in the tent.

We don't know why he didn't cover up his Dad. Perhaps he was too shocked and wasn't thinking straight. Perhaps he wanted his brothers to have a bit of a laugh. Clearly his motives weren't good because Noah curses him as a result of his lack of discretion.

Shem and Japheth did the right thing. They wanted to protect their father's honour so they very discreetly walked backwards, covering up his nakedness. They were respectful even when Noah's actions didn't apparently deserve respect.

I want to tell you another story about a young couple who messed up. This promising young couple were ministry leaders enrolled at a study course in Bethel Church, California. They had a sexual relationship and now the girl was pregnant.

They were invited to come Danny Silke's office. Danny is a Senior Leader's in the church and the author of the book we are using.

Imagine how they felt then – most likely they thought they'd be chucked out of school. Also invited to meet were two other staff members involved with the young couple.

So Danny began their time by checking if they needed water or anything. Then he asked them what the problem was. Duh! They were pregnant. And that was their reply.

But that wasn't what Danny meant. He asked the young man if he had repented and he had. "So what have you repented of?" asked Danny. The young man admitted he didn't really know what he had repented of.

Danny went on to say he couldn't repent if he didn't know what the problem was. And he kept on asking both of them questions.

To cut a long story short, it turned out that one person was overwhelmed by a fear of rejection and the other had serious trust issues. Those things lay at the heart of what had happened; not so much the sexual relationship itself.

Together they began to explore the deeper issues and who would be affected by the pregnancy. They considered the ones who had trusted and respected them; younger ones who looked up to them, fellow students, their parents and others. They began to list them all down and they grieved as they did so.

The couple thought about covering up the whole situation so no-one need know. However they realised this was dishonest. They courageously decided to tell those who were impacted. And as they did so they were met with love and grace. There were a couple of negative responses but almost everyone honoured them for their integrity in facing their issues.

Instead of the shame they felt earlier, now the young couple felt embraced and honoured. They were no longer victims because they had been empowered to take action as they faced the truth about deep issues within themselves.

What a contrast between the two situations of the young couples! In the first situation the young couple were judged, condemned and victimised. Everyone involved felt bad about what happened and it negatively impacted many people permanently.

In the second situation, the young couple were confronted lovingly. There was no cheap grace! There was no superficial forgiveness. Rather they were respected as people of worth; people who had the ability to look within themselves and see what was lacking; people who the Lord would continue to work with and grow.

Now Jesus treats us like that too. He never despises those who stuff up. That's reassuring isn't it? Jesus never condemns us. Nor does he gloss over our sin. Rather he gives us the opportunities to face our shortcomings together with him so they can be transformed into strengths.

I love the Message version of our reading from Matthew. Jesus praises God because he likes to reveal his ways to ordinary people. We don't have to be anything special to know the Lord. Jesus talks tenderly to the people about how he wants to teach them the ways of his Father. He wants to do it! He wants us to know about this special relationship he and his Dad share. He wants to include us in that relationship!!!!

Listen to the rest of his words, again from the Message:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

How is that for respect? We don't deserve it yet the Lord wants to honour us by teaching us as we walk with him. And remember that Jesus is talking to a group of people not just to individuals.

Will you commit to learning from Jesus? Will you commit to walking with him alongside each other? Will you commit to allowing him to show you how to honour his people as you respond to his love for you? This is something we need to commit to together.

Please take the opportunity during Communion or during the worship to offer the Lord your heart once again and to commit to this body – we need you and you do need us, even if we frustrate the heck out of you.

Jesus loves you so much just as you are. He honours you so much that he wants to take you on in him and in your relationship with each other. We want to grow our church culture so that honour for him and for each other is paramount.

I know the Lord has spoken to some of you this morning. Please tell someone else about that. Ask them to pray for you to keep on being open to him. Let's allow our love for him and our respect for each other to grow over the next few weeks.