

Honest honour – culture of honour series

Readings: Job 40:1 – 10, Matthew 16:13 – 17, 21 - 23

Is telling a white lie dishonest? Say your friend has just had their lounge redecorated. You hate it! What do you say when they ask your opinion?

What about when we avoid saying something awkward? You are at a flash dinner with the Bishop and he has a ginormous piece of parsley stuck to his chin. Do you tell him? Is it dishonest not to?

As Christians I think we are often far too polite; to the point where we blur the truth or avoid it completely. You could argue in some situations that it doesn't matter.

Perhaps not. Perhaps your friend doesn't need to know you don't like the new décor. Perhaps the Bishop could look silly for the rest of the evening or someone else could tell him.

Too often our 'niceness' means we are dishonest with God, with others or with ourselves.

We've been exploring growing a Culture of Honour here in this church. I want to say that dishonesty is the opposite of honour; hiding the truth is actually dishonourable.

So I want to talk today about how honesty and confrontation play an important part in honouring God, others and ourselves.

Some of you will be getting nervous about now. Perhaps you've been on the hard end of someone else's honesty and pain was the only result.

You are right to be nervous because confrontation does need a few provisos doesn't it?

What might some of those be?

- The motive of the person doing the confrontation – it needs to be one of love.
- The aim must always restoration of relationship or genuine help for someone who could be harming themselves or others.
- The timing needs to be right. Never confront someone who is majorly stressed or angry.

We do need to take all those things into account. However confrontation is an important part of our Christian journey with the Lord and with each other. We do no-one any favours by truth avoidance.

Okay – let’s now consider three relationships in which honesty and gentle confrontation will be helpful.

1. Our relationship with God
2. Our relationship with others
3. Our relationship with ourselves. Another way to put that is self-awareness or self-understanding.

1. Our relationship with God - let’s turn to the book of Job.

Job most likely lived about the time of the patriarchs. At that time family was everything. Being blessed by God meant you had a big family which was really well provided for. You knew you were okay if this was the case.

The Book of Job is “Wisdom” literature. It raises some really deep philosophical issues but the main point is that the Lord is Sovereign and trustworthy. Suffering is permitted. It’s really hard to understand but it helps Job grow in the Lord.

Justice and affliction defy our explanation and emphasise that human beings are unable to view life from God’s perspective. We are very limited in what we can see and understand. That doesn’t stop Job from wrestling with God in the midst of his affliction.

And this is another really important point in the book of Job: we are actually meant to do that. We are meant to be honest about injustice and how we feel about that. We mustn’t settle for a superficial relationship where we pretend everything is okay. We are meant to be honest with God.

At the end of the book God does effectively says “Well I am God”.

And Job responds with:

“I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers?
I will cover my mouth with my hand.
I have said too much already.
I have nothing more to say.” Job 40:4 – 5

But I think there is a very strong argument Job can say this because his loving Friend God he given him freedom of expression so far. Job has said all he needs to. God never says “Shut up Job! You have no right to question me.”

The Lord declares who he is to Job - one who is worthy of respect. The Lord is not addressing an equal to be sure, but he is addressing a man whose honesty merits reassurance. So the Mighty God reminds him everything is in hand even though it didn’t appear so.

Contrast this with the way the Lord speaks to Job's friends:

"I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has. So take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer on your behalf. I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has." Job 42:7b – 8

Sure Job thinks he has overdone it but the Lord doesn't seem to think so.

When Job prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes. In fact, the Lord gave him twice as much as before! Job 40:10

So the Lord rewards Job's faithfulness, and I think He rewards Job's honesty too. I think our Loving God really likes it when we are prepared to go deeper and face what is going on for underneath the surface. I think the last thing the Lord wants is superficiality.

Job's relationship with God was strengthened because he confronted God as honestly as he could from his limited standpoint.

2. To help us consider our relationship with others let's look at the Gospel story in Matthew chapter 16.

I want to focus on Jesus' truth-telling in this story. There are two examples in the story –

Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.

Jesus could have fudged it and not told his friends about his impending death. What would have happened if hadn't told them?

They would have been even more lost and confused than they were. At least after Jesus died, his followers were able to recall his prediction. That given them some reassurance at least: Jesus was working to God's plan.

Peter's reaction is interesting though isn't it? It is a perfectly normal; perfectly human reaction. It is the same reaction we often have to bad news. Denial. "No! That is too painful. It can't happen!"

But Peter's reaction is more than an initial kneejerk response. Peter takes Jesus aside. Peter has thought about Jesus' words. He can't see why Jesus needs to die. His love for Jesus overtakes God's plan. Peter is missing the whole point of why Jesus came to earth as one of us.

Jesus can't allow Peter to wallow in deliberate denial. Peter must see God's plan if he is to be Jesus' follower. Peter must see what Jesus' death will accomplish or he can't be part of God's plan. He must know the truth about Jesus to be an Apostle and spread the Good News of the Gospel to a fallen and hurting humanity.

So Jesus confronts Peter, and he doesn't have time to pull any punches:

“Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's.” v23

Jesus needed to shock Peter into seeing the truth. Jesus demands a complete about-face from those who would follow him as later words demonstrate. (Read them later for yourselves.)

Some years back I had a disagreement with a friend named Gael. Her and I were doing a Bible study with an older woman at the time. (Margaret was 28 then!). We asked this woman if we could do individual studies with her so we didn't have to be together.

Margaret said she'd think and pray. Then she called us together and gave us a very gentle but firm telling off. At the time I was very hurt. Margaret met with me later individually and told me she knew it was a hard lesson but that the honest working through of relationships was an essential part of my Christian growth.

She was right. Gael and I resolved our differences. Later Gael was my bridesmaid.

And yet I recall from Scripture:

Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy.
Proverbs 27:6

Now Peter would have been really hurt by Jesus' words. I'm sure anyone would. But this is a pivotal time in Jesus' life and ministry. He doesn't have time to waste now.

If we need to confront someone, I hope we will never be this blunt. Remember we are not Jesus and we might be wrong. Always read 1 Corinthians and allow the words to sink into your spirit before confronting anyone:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. 4 - 7

Still the principle of honest confrontation holds true. Jesus motivation as always, was to bring Peter into an understanding of truth; thus helping him grow in faith and in ministry. These things were essential for Peter's relationship with others too.

3. Now to help us with our relationship with ourselves I want to turn to the sentence for the day.

Blind Pharisees! First cleanse the inside of the cup, and then the whole cup will be clean. Matthew 23:26

Another of Jesus hard sayings.

Jesus never avoids the truth; is never too polit. I could have chosen any one of his blunt statements.

What is Jesus trying to achieve here? I think he wants the Pharisees to see the truth about themselves. He longs for them to be the people; the leaders that the Lord has called them to be. He wants them to be good teachers and to do that they need to be self-aware.

They need to know about the sin that lurks within them. I watched an interview with Tony Campolo recently. <http://www.redletterchristians.org/love-sinner-hate-sin-doesnt-work/>

Tony Campolo is one of my all-time favourite wise guys. The interview was about sexuality but Tony's comment about hating the sin and loving the sinner is what I want to focus on in terms of our own self-awareness. First he points out that 'love the sinner; hate the sin' is not a Biblical phrase – Jesus never said that. What Jesus said in effect was 'love the sinner and hate your own sin'.

"Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye but fail to notice the beam in your own eye?" Matthew 7:3

Jesus wanted the Pharisees to look inside themselves and see their sin so that they could bring it into the light and ask for forgiveness. Then they could be clean and enable others to become more self-aware and receive forgiveness also.

Many of us are afraid of facing our sin:

- Some view it as negative. Someone left our church a while back; partly because we confess our sin corporately each week.
- Others see it as navel gazing or digging for something that isn't really there.
- Some of us struggle with really embracing that we are truly loved by God and looking at our sin only makes it worse.

We can actually come up with a long list of reasons as to why we shouldn't look inside ourselves. The truth is though; that if we don't have some idea of who we really are; then our relationship with God and with others is based on a false premise, on pretence. The false us is doing the relating, not the person we really are.

Acknowledging our sin, our failures, our weaknesses, the things we wish we could change, whatever language you want to use for it, brings freedom.

When we bring our true selves into the light of Christ then the Holy Spirit can begin to work with us and take us on to be the people we were always designed to be.

I feel like I have only scratched the surface of this important topic. We are not Jesus and need to remember that our perceptions are flawed and limited. We need to be more gentle with others than he was because of that. However we do ourselves, each other and the Lord, a great disservice if we are not honest with each other.

When I began this series, I said that the aim was to help us be a safe place where we encourage each other to use our various gifts; to be growing as a Christ-like community. Today's theme is 'honest honour'. We must confront ourselves and each other, lovingly (the emphasis on 'lovingly') at times.

In fact there is no such thing as dishonest honour. We cannot honour the Lord, each other or ourselves unless we are prepared to have honest, awkward, even heated conversations at times.

Please do check out the Reflection Questions in the Church newsletter through the week and ask the Lord to use them to help you grow.

Reflection Questions:

- 1 Job spoke plainly to God. His anger at God's apparent injustice was evident. How honest are we with the Lord about our own feelings and circumstances or those of others?
- 2 Jesus spoke plainly to his disciples about going to Jerusalem, and what would happen to him there. What topics do we avoid talking about with those we love?
- 3 Jesus confronted Peter when he was off-beam. Is there some honest confrontation that needs to happen within yourself or between you and another?
- 4 If you sense a need for more honesty in your life, how will you go about achieving that prayerfully and lovingly?