

Humble service

Readings: Psalm 131, Matthew 6:24 – 34

How would you describe humility?

On Tuesday an older lady from our congregation, a quiet and rather shy lady, crossed the road to ask a man if he would like to come to Lunch on the Hill that day. He did. And he had a great time. However the lady got out of her comfort zone and showed hospitality, risking rejection as she did so.

Another mature, quiet-ish lady, from our church joined in cabbage football at our camp last weekend. One of the other churches was short of a team member. Without any fanfare this woman joined in the rough and boisterous game for someone else's team. She wasn't in the least concerned as to whether she might fall or look silly. Another team needed someone – she would be that someone.

One man comes to Lunch on the Hill most times. He helps clear the tables and chairs away and then he gets out the old-fashioned floor sweeper thing-ee we have. He weaves is skilfully back and forth across the floor picking up food and fluff. That is his job. He humbly and faithfully does that each fortnight.

My point is this; humility, humble service, doesn't always mean staying under the radar so that no-one sees what you do. Anonymous acts of service have their place and their own joyous blessing.

But humble service very often means that you actually have to be seen in order for people to see Jesus through you.

Let's turn to Psalm 131.

John Goldingay gives this psalm the subtitle: How I gave up trying to fix things and so should you.

David is probably the writer and he begins with this astounding statement "Lord, I am not proud". Other translations say "Lord, my heart has not been lofty."

This one statement alone is a pretty good motto for life:

"Lord" David knows God. David knows God is sovereign. He knows he is not. He knows Yhwh; the Lord has a plan that God himself is working out. David doesn't have to.

"I am not proud." David is realistic. He is mature. He does what he can, the things God tells him to do. He doesn't sit around on his ...

He is enthusiastic; sometimes embarrassingly so – embarrassing to others that is. Recall the time he danced, half-naked as the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. (2 Sam 6)

However David doesn't need to be the centre of attention. He goes on to say "I have calmed and quieted myself". The CEV translates that as being content sitting on his mother's lap but the original language refers to being breast-fed by his mother.

"My spirit is nursed within me" one translation has it. He has been fed and no longer needs to be the centre of attention. David is saying he has all he needs – physically and spiritually.

"And so I trust God" he says. "And Israel you should too."

Trust and humility are evident in this short psalm. Great kings too, can be humble.

Jesus too is asking for a kind of humility in his invitation to focus our worship and attention on God and God's Kingdom.

As he contrasts God and money; he contrasts humility and trust with insecurity, boastfulness and greed.

And he paints beautiful word pictures, calling on the experience and imagination of his listeners, as he describes God's abundant provision for birds and wildflowers.

Don't worry about everyday life. Don't be fixated on food, drink, clothes, a roof over your head ...

What things do you worry about? Your pension? Family? Growing old?

Focusing on those things is our downfall. Instead "Seek first the Kingdom of God and everything else will be sorted."

Focusing on God's Kingdom and how we are part of extending that, sorts our priorities. It gives us a confidence that not many of us have otherwise.

Jan South quoted Bishop Justin in our newsletter. He said that when we decide to follow Jesus, we write him a blank cheque, or give him our pin number to bring the analogy up to date. We say "I am yours. Do with me what you will."

Like David, everything we do and say and think begins with "Lord". We are his servants.

We are servants but Jesus chooses to call us friends. (John 15:15) He tells us the things he is doing and he asks us to partner with him in those things; in extending his community.

In order to do those things, we will have to be seen. "God has no hands and feet but yours" said Teresa of Avila.

And the thing is, that when we are truly humble servants, we won't mind being seen so much. Most of us struggle with self-confidence.

My dear friend told me the other day of something I used to do that was really annoying. Some of you may have noticed.

Apparently if someone was up the front at church and I needed to come up for some reason, I would kind of shrink down. I was trying to hide myself; perhaps deeming others more worthy than me.

My friend says I don't do that now. My confidence in who God has called me to be and what he has called me to do is growing. I don't have it all sorted – put me in an unfamiliar place with people I don't know and I may revert a little.

But generally I am happy for people to see me, Susan, because through me people can see Jesus. And that is truly what matters. It doesn't matter if I look like a dork or embarrass myself – what matters is that the Spirit of Jesus draws people through me, and through you, to himself.

On Friday I spent some time at the beach with others. We were invited to imagine Jesus on the beach with us and to listen to what he would say to us.

Here is what I think he said to me. I share those words with you because I don't think Jesus' words were only for me:

“You've got this. You think you haven't
but you have.
I am with you always
and you are so used to me
holding your hand,
leading you,
giving you the words to say
that you think it is just you
and you doubt yourself.

But it's never just you – never!
It's always 'us' – together.

We've got this. Trust me
Trust yourself
and take big, humungous, hairy steps

and watch what happens.”

Humble service means walking with Jesus and listening to him; not needing to be recognised. It means we don't focus on flash clothes or houses that make us look good. Humble service means that we are an important vehicle for reaching out but that is all we are. We are not the end product. Looking good is not the goal. Jesus is the goal.

How would you describe humility? I'd describe it as looking outward, side by side with the Holy Spirit, confidently doing the things he commands us to do in his world.

We enter the season of Lent this week. Lent is the season we prepare ourselves to experience again with Jesus, his suffering and his resurrection.

During Lent people have traditionally given up stuff in order to have more time for prayer and more awareness of the Spirit of God at work within us. That's a good discipline. There is nothing wrong in giving something up.

Increasingly I notice that people are taking on something as well or instead of giving something up. For example one might decide to read more of the Bible or set aside additional time for prayer. Those are good things to do.

I'd like to offer you a wee challenge this Lent though (perhaps in addition to what you have already decided).

I'd like you to adopt one practice that pushes you out of your comfort zone, even if only slightly. I'd like you to ask the Lord for:

something you can do that takes courage,
something that makes you visible,
maybe something only you can do,
something for someone else, preferably someone who might normally miss out,
certainly something God wants you to do to partner with him to build his Kingdom here on earth.

Reflection questions:

How would you describe humility?

Jesus says "I tell you not to worry about everyday life". Matt 6:25 What things make you worry?

What things enable you to trust God and others?

What can you share humbly and confidently with others?