

LENT 5

IN THE WORLD THE RECOGNISED RULERS LORD OVER THEIR SUBJECTS, AND THEIR GREAT MEN MAKE THEM FEEL THE WEIGHT OF AUTHORITY. THAT IS NOT THE WAY WITH YOU; AMONG YOU, WHOEVER WANTS TO BE GREAT MUST BE YOUR SERVANT, AND WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST MUST BE THE WILLING SLAVE OF ALL.'

Mark 10 : 42f

Jesus repeatedly emphasised the importance of humility and warned of the dangers of self-centredness. In a story in St. Luke's Gospel chapter 14, we are told that Jesus was invited to a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee at which Jesus noticed how the guests were trying to secure the places of honour. So he told a parable about a wedding feast in which he pointed out that it was much wiser to take the lowest place at the table, so that when your host comes he will say, "Come up higher my friend." Then all your fellow guests will see the respect in which you are held. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

I often wonder, when I read that story, what happened next? There is of course no way of knowing. But it is interesting to speculate. I wouldn't mind betting that they started arguing over which of them should be allowed to take the lowest seat! Such is the perverse nature of human beings. In fact I've seen it happen at confirmations when the Bishop has insisted upon being last in the procession of ministers. I'm still not sure which position in a procession at York Minster is regarded as the lowest and which is the highest. It does suggest that we worry too much about status in the Church of England.

It is a conundrum - a riddle - if you want to be exalted, then humble yourself. Because if you are the kind of person who wants to be exalted then you haven't yet understood the message.

But Jesus liked the conundrum - it confused people - it made them think for themselves. He used it many times - for example the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. When praying in the Temple - Pharisee, "I thank you God for making me me" - Tax Collector, "God have pity on me, a sinner" - everyone who makes himself great will be humbled - and everyone who humbles himself will be made great."

There is the danger of course. One of the tragic ironies of our western culture is that, in spite of our prosperity and power in comparison the rest of the world, we are beset by a malaise called 'low self-esteem.' In my first parish, there was a lady who often repeated the statement ---"I shall not be coming to communion vicar, --I'm not good enough." This was genuine humility, but it was crippling her spiritually. Also it gave the hint that she didn't think that I was good enough either. She had forgotten a fundamental truth - God created us human beings - God looked at everything he had made and 'saw that it was good.' (a phrase repeated six times in the first chapter of Genesis.)

Yes of course then came Adam & Eve and the fall and all that, but in the beginning everything which God created was good. We know that it is easier to sin rather than not to sin, but having a low opinion of yourself does not help. God knows that like humpty dumpty, we have fallen off the wall - and putting us together again is a mighty task. But Jesus died to put us together again.. God breathed his Spirit into us and the sacrament which we share in today, we find

forgiveness and a new beginning. No one is beyond redemption. He shows us that in his death on the cross.

True humility begins with a true estimation of yourself and an acknowledgement that you are a child of God - created in his likeness. God loves you, as the song says, 'Just the way you are.' Once this is appreciated, we can go on to the second stage, which is 'Now love your neighbour as you love yourself'. This is literally the life-blood of the Christian church. That love which regards other people as better than yourself but without denigrating yourself. St. Paul puts it like this, "If our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any loving consolation, any sharing of the Spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another, the same turn of mind, and a common care for unity. There must be no rivalry among you, but you must humbly reckon others better than yourselves. Look to each other's interests and not merely to your own." (Phil. 2 : 1 - 4).

AMEN