

Sunday December 1st Relating to others – keeping a humble attitude

Now that we are into the Advent season with only a few weeks to go until Christmas we are beginning our descent, heading towards our final destination of our sermon series *Fully Free*.



I hope you have found it as helpful as I have to rethink what it means to be spiritually free, and live in the light of the victory over the darkness and the freedom from captivity Jesus bought for us on the cross. We started out by exposing some of the hollow and deceptive philosophies currently pervading our society which can easily take our thinking captive - unless we centre our thoughts on Jesus and focus on God's truth and promises instead. Jesus said 'if the son sets you free you will be free indeed!' but we can all too easily forget that when you admit your need, believe in Jesus and accept Him as your Lord and Saviour you leave your old life behind and become a totally new creation with the Holy Spirit to help and guide you. You are no longer a sinner, but a saint, clothed in God's grace and declared righteous because Jesus dealt with all our sin on the cross. Salvation is a wonderful thing and no wonder there is rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents and turns to the Lord.

It is one thing to believe and receive this salvation promise, it is quite another to work out this salvation on a daily basis such that it really starts to make a difference to our thought patterns and behaviour. Just like it is one thing to be given your first bicycle for Christmas, but quite another to learn how to ride it! The trouble is that along the Christian journey, even experienced riders can run into all sorts of hills and obstacles, or the wheels can fall off your bike or you get into a collision with someone riding next to you.



The fact is that where most of us come unstuck at one point or another in the Christian life is in the whole area of relationships. John Wimber said 'people come to church for many reasons but they stay for only one – relationships.' And it's true – our relationships with one another as well as with the Lord is what sustains our faith and keeps us encouraged.

I was so thrilled to meet a guy at West Wick church at last week's baptism. He asked me what I did and when I told him I was one of the ministers at Locking Castle he said 'I see –

come to nick some ideas have you?’ Then he told me how he’d brought his daughter along to church because she had been asking him all sorts of questions about life and faith, and he wanted her to be able to find out for herself. ‘But now I’ve ended up coming for me!’ He said. ‘the people became my mates and now I’m here learning just as much for me as for my daughter!’

Much of the Apostle Paul’s teaching addresses how we can live together as Christ intended and avoid the relational collisions and pile ups which can cause so much pain.

Today’s reading is from Paul’s letter to the Philippian church where the background story was that two women Euodia and Syntyche had fallen out and were refusing to reconcile. In the closing chapter of the letter Paul pleads with them to be reconciled and be of the same mind – putting Christ first.

So as we read this reading, perhaps think about your own relationships – and particularly those which may not be as unified as you would like them to be and just hear Paul’s prescription for reconciliation and unity.

Philippians 2

¹Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and

trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

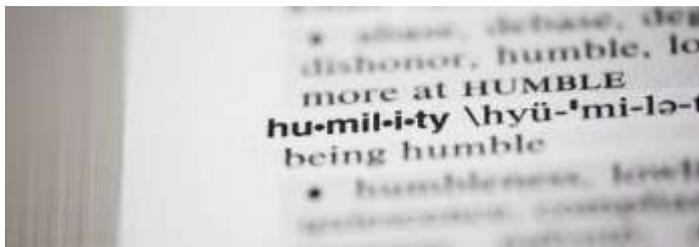
¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain.

The preacher Ray Steadman describes this passage as the Mount Everest among the mountain peaks of revelation concerning the Person of Christ, describing how the eternal son of God stepped out of eternity into time, and became human as God intended humanity to be.

The Path to a peaceful life and happy relationships, even when difficulties and quarrels tend to make us combative or stressed, is not to seek our own vindication but to imitate Christ by seeking humility instead.

Humility is one of those words we struggle to fully understand – partly because it is so counter cultural it is out of our radar.

Humility comes from the Latin word humilis, which literally means low.



And in this passage Paul teaches us several keys to humility which can help us put it into practice and learn how to foster great relationships.

The first thing is that humility is a choice we make for ourselves which is contrary to the ways of the world. The world values ambition, but Paul tells us to do *nothing* out of selfish ambition. Instead be ambitious for others. Be ambitious for the Kingdom of God. Promote others instead of yourself. This is very much an active choice.

The interesting thing is that the lovely hymn about having the mindset of Jesus starts with self awareness and self consideration. If there is one thing I see time and again when people are at odds with one another and locked into the captivity of painful relationships, it is that there is a lack of self-awareness. What I mean by that is that in our blame culture we are conditioned to find fault and take offense at the behaviour of others when actually the first base of power to change the situation lies with us.

Jesus was self-aware. Being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

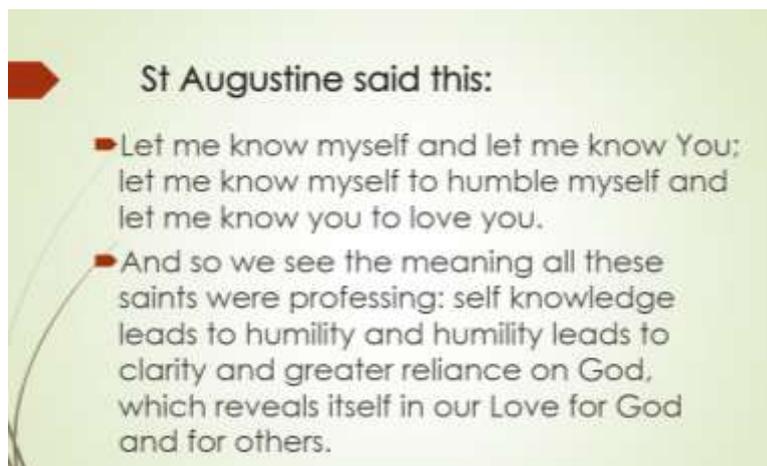
Each of us has power. You can direct your power towards vengeance or you can direct it towards liberty. This is your choice. Humility is not a feeling, it is a choice to lay down our power and our rights for the sake of another.

So the first stage of humility is recognising that the primary person we have power to change is ourselves.

The secret to the successful marriage counselling that I have observed is to try to help redirect each partner's frustrations with the other towards self-awareness, recognising the first way to change the situation is to change your own reactions.

Franciscan monks study the virtue of humility as one of their core values. St Francis said that a person's greatness depends on their ability to 'make themselves little.'

St Teresa of Avila agreed when she said 'there is more value in a little study of humility and in a single act of it than in all the knowledge in the world.'



So humility is a choice. It starts with self-awareness, and then thirdly, humility asks God for guidance.

Jesus became obedient – even to death on a cross.

Obedience is another word you don't often find in organisational values statements. But seeking God's will and holding off making a wrong response is a mark of humility.

Jesus didn't fancy going to the cross – he had to sweat it out until he was able to determine and accept God's will for his life.

Humility focuses on responsibilities rather than rights – as author Simone Weil commented: ‘One cannot imagine St. Francis of Assisi talking about rights.’

Emphasising rights over responsibilities sows the seeds of destruction in any relationship.

Neil Anderson challenges us to think differently about many different areas of relationships:

Whether it is husbands and wives taking responsibility for each other’s wellbeing instead of keeping tallies of concessions made. Or parents taking responsibility for modelling Christlikeness to the children despite their lack of obedience.

Does being a church member give you the right to criticise others or does it give you the responsibility to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, and give, serve and forgive one another when challenges come?

Humility is a choice, beginning with self-awareness, to follow God’s guidance to focus on our responsibilities to others.

Jesus left his vindication up to God. And therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every other name.

I went to a leadership training day earlier in the week which focussed on relationships and we were given feathers to help us think about relationships in the church.

If you look at a feather, their structure you can see is the shaft with lots of what are called barbs. But these barbs stick together because they are interconnected by tiny barbules that hook over one another.



If you rub a bird feather the wrong way, it looks dishevelled and it is useless as a flight feather.

But wonderfully, as you smooth it the correct way, the barbules reconnect and it becomes useful again.

Birds spend hours preening their feathers – not just to look beautiful, but so they can fly.

Each of us in the church is like the barbs of a feather. We need each other to be able to fly. Spending the time necessary to preen our relationships is vital for the kingdom of God.

Humility is the key to great relationships – let's spend the time it requires to get them right
– not only for our sake, but the sake of the Kingdom.