

## **SERMON – 24/3/24**

### 'Christian Humility'

1 Peter 5:1-14

"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:5,6)

It's providential that it is on Palm Sunday that we come to the closing chapter of this First Letter of Peter which we have been reading through together over the last few weeks. Peter addresses the related themes of leadership and humility and what better example could we have of both than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who, though He was in very nature God, did not strive for equality with God but made Himself nothing for our sakes and yielded Himself to death in our place.

Expectations were running at fever pitch in Jerusalem that day. Centuries of waiting for the Messiah to be revealed were being stoked up by word that had filtered down from the north of the life-changing teaching and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth and miraculous signs and wonders that accompanied it, and the rumour that Jesus was on His way to the city at Passover time when thousands of pilgrims had gathered from all over the country and the Jewish Diaspora across the Roman Empire.

The shout went up and was echoed passionately by the approaching pilgrims There He is! Lord, save us! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The prophet Zechariah had foretold this day: "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious." (Zech.9:9) But what do they see? Not a glorious figure riding in military triumph like a conquering king as perhaps people had envisaged it, but a lowly man riding on a donkey's colt. Perhaps nobody noticed on the day itself that this unexpectedly meagre entrance was also foretold in the closing words of that verse from Zechariah: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech.9:9) Perhaps it was only with hindsight, and in the aftermath of the utterly

astounding unfolding of events in the days that followed, that people began to see that although the people of Israel had expected a much grander, more kingly Messiah, they had comprehensively misunderstood so much of what was read to them in their synagogues week by week.

And what I'd like to suggest this morning is that we too perhaps need to open our minds and hearts to a more challenging message than we often allow ourselves to hear in church week by week. Are we not just as guilty as those who welcomed Jesus that first Palm Sunday of hearing only what we want to hear and spectacularly missing what God is calling us to be and to do as His people today?

In the chapter we read from 1 Peter this morning, the apostle addresses his message to two groups of people – elders and younger people. We can take him to be addressing both those who are older or younger in years *and* those who are more or less mature in the things of the faith regardless of their age. What is clear is that he is talking to *all* of us and that there is something that each of us needs to take on board today.

In our church as in the early church leadership is given by those who are called 'elders' – Peter describes *himself* as a 'fellow elder' and there is a message to those of us who find ourselves in any kind of leadership role in the church, whether that is as an elder of the Kirk Session or as a leader of a group within the fellowship. Peter points to the example of Jesus' leadership in three different ways – shepherd leadership, servant leadership and suffering leadership.

In v.2 Peter appeals to church leaders to be "shepherds of the flock that God gave you and to take care of it willingly, as God wants you to, and not unwillingly." Peter describes Jesus here as the Chief Shepherd and we are reminded of how the Lord had seen the crowds on the shores of Galilee and had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd; we are reminded of the parable of the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep who were safely in the fold and going out to seek the lost sheep who was in danger; we are reminded that Jesus knows His sheep, lays down His life for the sheep and brings other sheep into the pen. If *Jesus* the Shepherd cares for the individual, protects those who are in

danger and gathers the flock for safe-keeping and support, are we who are leaders today not called to follow the same pattern? What does that look like in your life and ministry?

Secondly, in v.3 Peter goes on to say to church leaders: "Do your work, not for mere pay, but from a real desire to serve. Do not try to rule over those who have been put in your care, but be examples to the flock." Jesus had taught his squabbling disciples that whoever wants to be great must be the servant and that whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. Etched on our minds is the story of the Last Supper when Jesus got down on His knees and washed His disciples' feet. And if Jesus Himself acted like that should that kind of servant humility not also be the hallmark of Christian leadership today too? What does that look like in your life and ministry?

In this morning's passage, thirdly, Peter also returns to the theme of suffering that has run through the whole letter. Which of us wants to hear that message? Not one. And yet if Jesus is willing to humble Himself by accepting death, even death on a cross, it must be incumbent upon all who lead the way in the church to accept a measure of suffering as part and parcel of that role. Jesus' disciples James and John once asked if He would guarantee them places at His right and left hand side when He entered His glory and Jesus immediately replies by asking them if they are ready to drink the cup of suffering He had to drink and to be baptised with the baptism He had to undergo in His death. What does that look like in your life and ministry? Are we ready to take on what it might mean to be a follower of Jesus?

But not everything Peter says here is addressed to leaders. This is for all of us and it is the call to humility. In v.5 he writes: "All of you must put on the apron of humility, to serve one another." We are being called to put all the other worldly attributes away in the wardrobe because it is humility that is the garment of honour in the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter quotes a verse from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs: "God resists the proud, but shows favour to the humble" and in the light of that verse he urges all of us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand so that He will lift us up in due time. (v.6) This is actually not so much a call to do something hard but a call to *rest* ourselves in God: "Leave all your worries with Him, because He cares for

you." (v.7) If we are too proud we will trust in our own abilities and seek glory for ourselves but humility means putting our trust in God and giving the glory to Him. It goes against our human instincts to submit, to humble ourselves, but whereas in this world's terms yielding ourselves to another human being is seen as a sign of weakness, in the context of God's Kingdom humbling ourselves under the mighty, redeeming hand of God is in fact the way to a much greater victory, accepting all the twists and turns of His providence in the knowledge that He will exalt you.

The challenging message of this morning's reading that takes us to the heart of the Easter Gospel is that lip-service or a one-off acknowledgement of Christ as our Lord just won't cut it. Humble yourself - and go on humbling yourself before God - is what Peter is saying, trusting and trusting, casting all your anxieties along the way upon the Lord. And if our fear is that in putting others first we may end up being walked all over, perhaps we do well to remember that Jesus made Himself absolutely nothing and finally entrusted Himself to the Father as He let death walk all over Him. But, as we will be reminded during the course of the next week, look how that turned out!

In the words of the old children's hymn:  
"God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea;  
who gave the light its birth, He cares for me.  
God who sent His Son to die on Calvary;  
He, if I lean on Him, will care for me." (Sarah Betts Rhodes)

God cares for you enough to give Himself up for you in the person of His only Son. Jesus considered you to be better than Himself and gave His life in your place that you might be rescued from death. God is utterly trustworthy – He has shown Himself to be so and is calling to you afresh this morning to trust Him, to humble yourself before Him and others and to trust that He will care for you.

What will you do with that challenge this Easter? Do you trust God? Are you willing to submit your life to the lordship of Christ? And if you *are* doing that, are you clothing yourself with humility and showing others the Christlike way of the Suffering Servant Shepherd King. Walk with Christ this week not only down the palm-strewn road of celebration but in the hurly burly of a busy

day, in the quiet of a meal shared with friends, in the sharp pain of betrayal, through the abomination of institutional injustice, in suffering and even when death knocks at your door. Humble yourself under God's mighty hand and He *will* lift you up in due time.

Hosanna to the Son of David! How blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! And in the words with which Peter closes his letter: "May peace be with all of you who belong to Christ. " (v.14)