

Imitate the Action of the Tiger

Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted! This has led to all sorts of mental gymnastics, articulated brilliantly by a great little book entitled ‘my ministry manual’. The author begins by asking who can be worthy to share the nourishment of wisdom with the flock of the almighty – certainly not me – he writes – but, he continues, such humility shows that actually, I am worthy – so read and feed!

There is something very English about humility; we are good losers (which is just as well), we tend to back the underdog; we tend not to rock the boat. You can hear about English humility in Shakespeare’s Henry V, as the king rallies his troops to advance upon the city of Harfleur:

“In peace, there’s nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility. But when the blast of war sounds in our ear, then imitate the action of the tiger.”

It is with caution that I dare to disagree with Shakespeare, but there seems to be here an assumption that humility and modesty are very alike, and that they have nothing to do with conflict! But humility as it appears in Scripture assumes the presence of conflict in order to be humility at all. Humility, always and everywhere, presupposes confrontation.

Now when we think of being humble today, we tend to think of nothing other than modesty. Modesty being the refusal to blow your own trumpet. It means expressing your certainties and convictions in inoffensive ways, that don’t necessarily upset those with whom we disagree. It means a moderate estimation of ourselves, being shy, quiet, reserved. In fact, the dictionary links modesty with humility. Humility in our dictionaries means being lowly, deferential, lacking social status.

So, when Jesus declares that everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted – was he simply teaching us modern English etiquette? Was he simply teaching us how to conduct ourselves at a dinner party? Are the Gospels merely a first century Palestinian edition of Cecil B Hartley’s publication, *The Gentleman’s Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness*?

What did Jesus mean when he declared that everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted? Well, to begin with – that statement itself was highly controversial, deeply immodest, and blatantly confrontational. It is what scholars sometimes call a ‘parable of reversal’, where Jesus takes reigning logic and turns it upon its head. And what exactly was he turning on its head?

As always, it is important to hear Jesus in context. The context is a confrontation with those who consider themselves to be righteous, and looked upon others with contempt. And those who considered themselves righteous were not simply people who were a little bit ‘holier than thou’.

This weekend marks the 360th anniversary of the Putney debates, where a new constitution for England was forged. It was a crucially important step in the development of democracy world wide, and was based largely upon Scripture. And on radio 4 this morning, the vicar of the church at Putney today, was asked why the debates were based so firmly upon religion rather than politics. And the vicar rightly pointed out that religion and politics were

inseparable – Now that was certainly the case in the time of Jesus, and it remains the case today for those with eyes to see beyond the compartmentalisations of modernity.

The questions asked at the Putney debates were very close to the question on the lips of Jesus' listeners: "what does it mean to honour God with our country's politics". Well, the majority view in Jesus' day was that the heirs to the divine government that the country sought, were those who were righteous. Not self-righteous, or holier than thou – but those who stood for justice, and who believed themselves to be the means by which God would establish justice on the earth. And so this group, exalted themselves above the people, the hoi poloi.

Jesus says rather, that the heirs of the Kingdom of God are those who instead, were humble. They didn't have it all stitched up. They had not decided in advance what God's will is. They were contemptible because their lives were broken, without smugness, they did not keep all the regulations of the Torah, the Jewish law.

So to make his point, Jesus tells a story – centred in the religious and political centre of the world – Jerusalem's temple. And the story is of two people – a Pharisee (a custodian of moral truth, religious belief, and worthy of public respect), and a tax gatherer (a collaborator with pagan occupying force, profiting from others' misery, worthy of public contempt). And so the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like others, and not like this tax gatherer – and we have to hear this prayer not as a smug and pious claim, but one of genuine gratitude that this Pharisee is on the receiving end of God's special favour.

Then you have the tax gatherer, who could not even lift his eyes to heaven. His words have echoed through the centuries, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In other words – a declaration that his entire life is utterly dependant upon the grace and mercy of a loving God.

And the point here is what kind of a country should we be. What does it mean to be part of the kingdom of God. With whom are we to win favour? With people or with God? The point that Jesus is making, is that the people of God are truly characterised not by looking down upon other nations and social groups. It is rather the tax collector who represents the true Kingdom of God, the nation as it is called to be, because it is the tax collector who painfully but gratefully recognises his utter dependence upon the mercy of God. Here but by the grace of God go I, is not merely the acknowledgement of an individual, but the political basis of a nation.

But what does this actually look like? What has it got to do with humility? Well, humility hurts – and it hurts because of active confrontation. To be humble is to be reshaped by our encounter with others and with God himself.

Humility is how Jacob earned the name Israel. It was through humility – not because he was passive, but because he fought – he fought with an angel and in so doing wrestled with God himself. It left him permanently injured – but earned him the name 'Israel' – the basis of Israel's identity is this active wrestling with God. Humility is the capacity to engage with God and allow ourselves to be damaged in the process.

In contrast with Shakespeare – humility requires conflict, confrontation, controversy. As we are exposed to God's holiness, his divine otherness – with the result that we are fundamentally transformed. And it is precisely that capacity for transformation that is the true meaning of humility. That is why humility requires confrontation, and that is why it hurts. It

is true of us individually, corporately and politically. Humility is not the alternative to the action of the tiger – Humility IS the action of the tiger. It takes enormous resolve.

Now regardless of whether we see it or acknowledge it or like it, the church is a political body, that is called to embody the politics of heaven. And the politics is simply one of humility, of our capacity to be transformed by our encounter with God, and our encounter with others. It requires that we are constantly aware of our dependence upon the mercy of God today, not living on our past faith. It requires that we see God's grace at work in every dimension of our lives and every part of our church. It requires that we listen properly to other people, ready to hear God's voice in them and ready to be transformed by it.

Now this does not mean being a doormat, or being vulnerable to every wild claim that comes our way. Sometimes, engaging properly with another person will cause us to part company with them – but even then, a transformation has occurred – even and especially then, we have made ourselves vulnerable to the other.

Lewis and his train track! Stefan as an agent of holiness!

Now of course, it is easy for a church to close its door to God. To exalt itself, its theology, its politics – and simply worship a God who endorses all of our well-meant prejudices. And if that happens to us, then we have ejected Jesus himself. When Jesus said, 'behold I stand at the door and knock', he was knocking on the door of the church. The church is called to embody the politics of heaven, as a witness to the politics of our society – a politics that is based upon humility.

And naturally, we do not see much humility in our political structures today. The mythical war upon terror is the best example. Many western nations stand like the Pharisees, thanking God or whoever, that they are not like those contemptible terrorists. And instead of engaging in a radical humility, to get to grips with what truly fuels the bloodshed and unrest – it is preferable to tighten security, use media to amplify the dangers of terror above far more pressing problems in the world, and to wage war. It is pharisaic of the worst kind. A humble politics might instead look at the world as it really is, acknowledge our part in creating that world, fear to lift our eyes to heaven, and to allow our prejudices to be exposed to a genuine encounter with others.

Such encounters would hurt, they would require our politicians to imitate the action of the tiger. But we cannot expect them to do that for the sake of global righteousness, if God's own church cannot do it in worship.

Resurrection – cross is the ultimate humility, resurrection the ultimate exaltation. This is how God is remaking the world.

Humility IS the action of the Tiger