

WORDS MADE STRANGE

Beginning this evening and running throughout Advent, the evening sermons will be following a series entitled, “words made strange”. Usually, you would expect sermons to make biblical words more familiar to us, rather than making them more unfamiliar. But I believe that there is an urgent need today, for familiar truths to be made unfamiliar to us, and there are several reasons for this.

In Britain, like many countries in the Modern West, we inhabit a culture that has a strong Christian heritage. Many of our laws, much of our language, and plenty of our cultural habits – have their basis in Christian Scripture. So, what happens when we come into Church, is that we hear words used, words with which we are already familiar – and we fail to see what is distinctively Christian about them. Pride and Humility; Bodies and Members; Sin and Forgiveness; Faith and Doubt. What we tend to mean in English when we use these words, is very different from what those words meant in their biblical context.

Secondly, this can lead us to believe that we understand the Christian story more readily than we do in reality. So when we read Scripture, it loses its capacity to challenge us, to stand over against us, to invite us to live in new and exciting ways. But if we read Scripture as Holy Scripture, then it must always have the capacity to introduce something new into our world. Too readily however, we simply tame Scripture’s holiness, and we domesticate Jesus into the languages and laws and customs with which we are already familiar and comfortable.

This means, thirdly, that we can think we know more than we do. We can be rather proud of the fact that we are the ones who understand the Christian story, and for us, growth is now simply concerned with becoming more successful at living out the things that we believe. It can lead to an unwitting form of pride, that supposes we are in the right, and those with whom we disagree are in the wrong. But, of course we know, those with whom we disagree really are wrong! And one of the greatest obstacles to real Christian growth can simply be our pride. Which leads nicely to the first subject in this series:

Pride and Humility

We all know what pride is: pride is the great adrenaline rush you receive when you are affirmed at something good you have done. It is that feeling of deep satisfaction that you have achieved something good. It is watching your child in a school play, and thinking ‘that’s My boy.’ But, we shouldn’t be proud, so when we are congratulated – we say, oh it was nothing, oh it wasn’t much good really, because we don’t want to become proud do we! But actually, those feelings of accomplishment have nothing to do with real pride – they are nothing to feel bad about, and only something to feel satisfied and pleased about. If God one day says to us, ‘well done, good and faithful servant’, are we supposed to feel nothing – because if we do, God might then add – “...oh, but don’t get smug or you’ll be back to square 1.”

No, pride runs a little more deeply than this. So, we can all picture, can we not, somebody we know who is more fundamentally proud. On the surface, they can laugh at themselves, they will tell you that they are happy to be corrected; and of course – like everyone else on the planet – they are open-minded. Because, in our culture, we know that it is important for us to be perceived in this ways. But when you crack the veneer, and get to the real person – you see another logic at work. Yes, they can laugh at themselves – so long as they decide just

what it is you are laughing about; they can be corrected – just so long as they set the parameters within which correction might occur; And they are open-minded – just as long as they are not actually expected to change their minds on anything that is really important to them. And what do you know, below the surface is the same old person that cannot be changed.

But still, all of these traits do not get to the heart of what pride really is. Why is it that throughout Scripture, pride is the sin that seems to simmer quietly below all others? Why does God state his disgust at pride time and time again? Why do we hear, in both old and New testaments, that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble?

At the basis of all human pride, is the word ‘already’. In the reading from Proverbs, there is talk of the people who make plans in their heart (but only the Lord can realise them); we heard that there are those who believe that what they are doing is right – the real issue in this whole passage is our capacity for God to break into our world and change our plans. And in this context, pride is the refusal to make room for God. “The Lord hates those who are proud – you can be sure that they will be punished.”

Whatever symptoms pride might show, in its essence it is the refusal to make room for God, because you have already made your plans. You have prior commitments, you have already decided the course of your life. And that word ‘already’ is key. I wonder what prior commitments we might have made, that predetermine the way that we hear God speak:

What prior commitments might we have made, in relation to work or home or family or lifestyle, that expect God to fit in around our plans. In what ways might we no longer be capable of hearing God’s voice in all its fullness, because we have decided before we even listen, that there are certain things in our lives that are not up for grabs. There are non-negotiables that we are not willing to give up even for God himself. What commitments have we ‘already’ made, that would deafen us to the voice of God, and therefore the saving action of God in our lives? Right there, that refusal to allow the ‘already’ in our lives to be challenged by God, is the basis for all human pride.

When you look at the life of Jesus, he spent hours in prayer – he would go off alone to listen to God. His life was constantly up-for-grabs. And what we see in the life of Jesus is the opposite of pride – it is humility.

Humility

The reading from Philippians is a hymn that begins by pointing out that Jesus was ‘already’ equal with God, - he gave up his place with God – he abandoned his ‘already’ and made himself nothing. Sure, humility here is related to being of a lowly status. But it is also because of a conscious decision on the part of Jesus, to allow his hopes to be utterly depleted, as he humbled himself to death – and not just any death, but the worst sort imaginable – death on a cross.

Ultimately, at the heart of humility is not only some modest means of being self-deprecating and door-mat like. At the very heart of humility, is the readiness to be broken and remade by God himself. And if we can allow God to reshape us and remake our plans, then that will affect the way that we listen to other people. If we really are humble, then we really will be ready to hear God’s voice in surprising and unexpected places.

So, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, humility – in order to be humility at all, presupposes confrontation. That is, it presupposes the coming together of two parties on a single front – confrontation – not necessarily conflict. And humility is the word that describes how we relate to the other party.

It does not mean that we are a doormat, or that we allow the other party to walk all over us. But it does mean that we make ourselves vulnerable enough to engage, to confront, in such a way as to reshape our own perspective. But it does mean engaging with others as though we were seeking the voice of God himself, to impinge upon who we really are. That is humility, and it presupposes confrontation.

Humility is not some free-floating quality, that you might display with your manners, or politeness or whatever. It is your ability to engage another person properly, particularly with those whose very being threatens or questions even your most precious guarded beliefs, because only those with the capacity to do that, can be agents of holiness.

So Pride is not merely the same as being smug, or happy about your accomplishments, or pleased with your achievements. Pride is the deep-seated refusal to expose your treasured plans, beliefs and commitments to the transforming love of God. It is self-sufficiency in the extreme, and refuses to allow for the action of God in the world or in my life.

And humility, on the other hand, is the readiness to make room for God. The readiness to engage fully with others, and in so doing, to be open to the voice of God whenever it speaks. Humility is the expectation for the word of God and the readiness to respond to it, regardless of how that response might damage our reputation, disrupt our plans, or redraw our beliefs.

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.