Sermon for 29th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Job 38:1-7; Mark 10:33-45

i

Preoccupation with status and who’s got the latest promotion afflicts many professions across the commercial and industrial world. Who’s on their way up the pecking order is a topic of many a water-cooler conversation and the Church is no exception. Indeed, because the Church, like the military or the Law, or police, offer opportunities to wear special fancy dress that proclaims your status, the Church may attract more than its fair share of prima donnas. We hope it won’t be that way; but it probably is.

I quickly learned when I moved to Rome that the colour of the cummerbund one wears is a matter of some real significance, but it would be unfair to point the finger at Rome without acknowledging the same sort of preoccupations within my own church. It is just less colourful in my bit of world Methodism, but in other corners Methodism can strut its colourful stuff with the best of them.

However, we mustn’t be simplistic and holier than thou about rank and hierarchy. We all know that any organisation needs a hierarchy in order to function. If an organisation no longer has a functioning hierarchy it is no longer organised and is no longer an organisation. As one of my church’s leading bureaucrats, I recognise both the allure and the requirement for rank and status. Status can become a goal in itself and that is unhealthy, but fortunately, such an attitude is usually quickly recognised by others in the Church and people don’t feed such egos; but rank is necessary as a mechanism for holding the Church together in unity.

From the beginning, we have had bishop, presbyter and deacon. Pretending we can do without status in the Church is naïve. We just need to be aware of the pitfalls. Methodism is among those church traditions which has dispersed its power most widely among committees and Conference, between lay and ordained; and it is not just the ordained that can be preoccupied about status and power.

ii

In Mark 10:33-45 we witness the somewhat tacky episode of two of the apostles jostling for position within the new kingdom of God. When the other disciples hear what they’ve been asking of Jesus, they are all rather annoyed, but chiefly, as far as I can see, on the grounds that James and John got in first.

The most disappointing aspect is that the two apostles make such a request for special status just after Jesus has told them for a third time about his own powerlessness; he tells them that he will be betrayed, condemned to death, mocked, spat upon, flogged and put to death. This is the most detailed, graphic description of what lies ahead of them in Jerusalem, and yet still they look for special places of honour and power.

Jesus asks if they can drink from the same cup as he, and be baptised with the same baptism. Wesley points out in his commentary that this phrase refers to the inward, anguish of the mind and soul as depicted by drinking from the cup and to the outward physical suffering as depicted by being baptised.

Their response, “Yes, we can,” is too quick, too glib, too lacking in consideration to be taken seriously at this point. They are nearing Jerusalem and they still have a lot to learn.

It is not just the apostles who have a lot to learn about the nature of true status in the kingdom of heaven. Whenever we drink the Eucharistic cup we too pledge ourselves to accept the same cup as Jesus and our baptism proclaims we share his baptism of sacrificial suffering. This idea that higher Christian status brings commensurate increase in the call to bear suffering for the sake of Christ has been captured in the Catholic symbolism of a cardinal’s red hat. The red denotes that with such ecclesiastical high rank comes the expectation that such a witness is prepared to witness unto the shedding of his blood.

Jesus tells James and John that they will indeed drink from the same cup and receive the same baptism, because Jesus knows not only of his own approaching passion in Jerusalem, but also foresees the suffering his followers will endure in the years to come.

Yet Jesus is unwilling and unable to promise that either will sit on his right or his left in the kingdom. Those places of highest honour have been prepared for those who deserve them. Time will tell who those people will be. In the kingdom of heaven, promotion and honour will not come through favouritism or having the right connections, or by patronage, but by merit – merit acquired by those who have faithfully served and endured much suffering for the sake of the kingdom.

James and John need to be more modest about their ambitions to gain glory. Honour will be gained only by becoming servants of the kingdom and upon humbly accepting suffering for the sake of Christ.

iii

Today’s reading from Job 38:1-7 is also a useful lesson in humility. It is a lesson not confined to the Church, but a lesson the whole world would benefit by hearing.

In the last few weeks we have contrasted *Job* with the Wisdom tradition of *Proverbs*, and have noted how Wisdom tradition tends towards notions of having worked things out; how doing the right things, making the right choices leads inevitably to predictable, rationally explicable outcomes – whereas the *Job* tradition questions whether such theology is too simplistic and arrogant and offers in its place a more humble acceptance that God remains mysterious and beyond our rational understanding. Job has apparently done all the right things, and yet he suffers: This intentionally lampoons Wisdom literature’s view of religion. Job’s comforters offer in turn the rational arguments of the Wisdom tradition and in each case are found wanting.

We see this again in today’s passage in that famous verse:

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

Too readily we humans lay claim to greater knowledge than we really have. We gain an insight into cosmology and in the next breath we pension God off as being unnecessary to explain the creation of the universe. Those who still work on a “God of the gaps” image of God, who believe God is there to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the world until we have a scientific understanding, are particularly prone to this habit. It is a pity they are not more humble about what they know. They may be brilliant scientists, but they are not very good theologians.

Politicians too are prone to laying claim to abilities to achieve things that they do not possess. Eradicating poverty, solving the housing crisis, giving everyone a fair go and equal access to education are all laudable aims, but to pretend you have hit upon the trick that has eluded all previous generations and that you will solve these conundrums in the course of the next parliament is rather over-stating your capabilities.

Religious folk too need to know the limits of their knowledge. Not only do many ardent, but unskilled people pronounce on religious truths they barely understand – and this is not just from the Christian perspective, but also erudite Church leaders too often stray into the field of politics, economics and social science and offer simplistic solutions or meaningless idealistic absolutes.

Whatever our professional background, we all need to learn our own craft to the very best of our ability, but also recognise the limits of what we know and respect those from other professions to share their insights too.

Truth is not about gaining power for oneself, but about gaining wisdom for self in service to the world. Humility respects the knowledge of others and receives their truths. Humility requires that we accept that we don’t know everything and might be wrong even about the things we think we know.

Most of us learn these lessons with the passing of time. But most of us start off with the sort of arrogant assumption of our own worthiness such as we saw today in James and John. It’s sometimes a pity we can’t put an old head on young shoulders.

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