

Pentecost 22
1/11/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

Matthew 23:1-12

On being humble enough

In a sentence

Humility is letting go of self-righteousness and allowing that, whatever good we might do, our place with God is already guaranteed

Given how the Pharisees are portrayed in the gospels (however fair that might have been) it is perhaps surprising that Jesus here *commends* to us their teaching: they are the contemporary mouthpiece of Moses and so, as the teachers of the law of God, they are to be heard and respected.

At the same time, Jesus charges that they don't practice what they preach. This is not that simple hypocrisy that says one thing and does something else – teaching not to steal, but themselves stealing. Any particular Pharisee might have failed in this way but, as a group, they were upright and moral people and, for the most, beyond reproach when it came to doing the 'right' thing.

Jesus criticises them, rather, for their *exaltation* of themselves – their interest in being seen to have observed the law, and this in pursuit of the reward of high status in their community.

What is at stake here is the *purpose* of the law. Jesus accuses the Pharisees of acting as if the purpose of the law was to secure a strong standing before others and before God. Whereas it is usually the case in human society that those who achieve great things are honoured for their greatness, Jesus inverts the whole thing: 'the greatest among you will be your servant'. The law is not set aside here but it teaches now a radical *humility*. What the *properly* righteous know in their observance of the law is not social exaltation but *servanthood*, a *humbling* of self before God and others.

And yet it is not as simple as the simple saying of it might suggest. Matthew finishes off this teaching from Jesus with a summary which indicates what can be expected: 'All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.' In this seemingly straightforward statement is revealed the real difficulty of Jesus' teaching here – the problem of humility being *linked* to an exaltation.

If, as the gospels presume, our basic human desire is for a share in the peace and freedom of the kingdom of God, then it is very difficult not hear Jesus advising us to seek to be humble *in order that we may enter God's kingdom*.

To see the problem here we might ask ourselves the question, Am I humble enough? To answer the question 'Yes' is to make the Pharisees' mistake, holding that I have achieved true or sufficient humility to have 'earned' God's reward. That being the case, I know that I must answer this question, 'No', for surely to say No is more humble than to say Yes.

But this won't help me either, for what I am now trying to do is manipulate the teaching of Jesus. Clearly, it is 'more' humble to deny my humility, and by this means I might imagine that I can fool God into exalting me. Just as there are many people who strive after great things in order to be noticed and exalted in the eyes of others or even of God, there are many who adopt the posture of a 'servant' because it can also be a very effective way of securing control over a certain part of the world, a way of proving to us, to others and to God our *worthiness* of God's 'gift'.

This dynamic leads to the uncomfortable conclusion that there is no standing before God on the basis of *choosing* to be great *or choosing* to be humble. Serving others in genuine humility is both absolutely required and quite impossible, once we've actually heard this teaching of Jesus and turned it into just another law – being humble gets us right with God.

The problem here is the temptation to self-righteousness. Whenever I ask the question of myself, Am I 'good enough', or whenever we defend someone else with the argument that they are 'good enough', we fall into the deep moralism which consistently confounds our ability to hear the gospel. The call to be good is, of course, loud and clear; there is no softening of the demands of the law. The Pharisees and the scribes sit in the place of Moses and the commands of God they teach are good and right. *Do these things!*

But the temptation to assess myself or others as 'good enough' is almost irresistible, and it is this which Jesus challenges here.

Even if we who believe can find a way to resist it on our part, many of us will balk when it comes to those we love but who do not believe. We tell ourselves that surely they are good enough, humble enough. For all our talk about justification by grace through faith, and *not* by our good works, when push comes to shove we take moral offence and fall back on just these good works: surely they – and we also mean surely *we* – are good enough for God to accept us.

But now we see how talk of grace contradicts humility as a 'method'; humility does not earn points with God but must be tied up with grace, with the *gift* of God.

Humility is not a moral method; it is an openness to God's gift. While still striving to live rightly, humility releases us from anxiety about social conformity, from being *seen* to be right. Humility declares that God loves me apart from what I do, and it asks you to love me in the same way.

This is very hard. It is difficult to let go of what others think because what others think is a major engine to how communities operate. It is in our personal lives, in our news reports and in our politics.

The gospel, then, reveals what we do not want to hear: that we are all Pharisees, in the sense that Jesus criticises. We need to relax a bit in our critique of those upright and moral men who clashed with Jesus so long ago because the reason we still listen to those stories today is that they are *our* stories – it is Jesus' criticism of us we have heard today.

The gospel concerns the judgement of God: guilty of self-righteousness, of self-satisfaction, seen from the perspective of grace *already received*. The gospel does not distinguish between good and bad, between Christians or Muslims or Buddhists or atheists. It distinguishes, on the one hand, the self-righteous – the children of Adam who presume to judge what is good and what is bad (themselves included) – from, on the

other hand, those who receive their righteousness as a gift: those Jesus would make his sisters and brothers, the communion of saints.

Let us indeed seek to live upright, righteous, God-honouring lives, and call others to do the same: do justice, love mercy.

But let this be done in humility, and for humility's sake: the humility which does not presume to know about our own righteousness but which reflects that God already loves and accepts us, and will love and accept those we live with and serve.

Then we will be living the law, serving our neighbour, and honouring the God who calls us to just such a life and makes that life possible: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly within the grace of God.

To this God be all glory and honour, now and forever. Amen.
