

“Humility and service”

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Job 38:1-7,34-41 Mark 10:35-45

In the magnificent ancient story of Adam and Eve, the two first human beings are meant to live in complete security and peace in a beautiful fruitful garden, and they are given only one limitation – they are not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Sadly, Adam and Eve can't resist, they want it all. They want to be like God, to know and understand everything, all that is good and all that is evil, everything. As a result they lose their beautiful place in the garden. Their lack of obedience and humility is their undoing.

Jump forward a few millennia to the equally superb story of Job. Job's undeserved suffering has him railing against the injustices of life. In chapters 29 to 31 Job defends himself, proclaims his goodness, bemoans his fate, contests the accusations of his friends, and ends up challenging even God. But on today/s reading from chapter 38, Job is put in his place. God responds. “Who do you think you are?” is in effect what God says to him. Job's friends accuse him of being “righteous in his own eyes” and God bears this out, damning Job's self-righteousness with question after question, forcing Job to acknowledge his absolute ignorance and weakness compared with God himself. Who do you think you are!

The hard-done-by Job is put in his place. He thinks too highly of himself. He thinks he has all the knowledge and should have all the power to live life the way he wants. Like Adam and Eve, he lacks obedience and humility.

Then jump forward another few centuries to the disciples and Jesus. Not a story this time but an event. James and John look to steal a march on their fellow disciples by asking for places of glory in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus is horrified. They've been with Jesus for quite some months now and still they don't understand! Glory and power is not what Jesus is about. He has been showing them and teaching them that his mission is of caring and compassion, of linking people in with God's caring and compassion, and it's a mission which requires humility, service, willingness to sacrifice and to suffer. True greatness lies not in status or wealth or power, but in service, in obedience to God who himself relinquishes power, who makes himself vulnerable in Jesus, who suffers for the sake of others.

We human beings love to be powerful, over ourselves, over our world, over other people. Every generation, every nation, every community and many families are full of people who want to control, to dominate, to think of themselves as better than others, to have power and wealth and high status. But that's not the way of God. Jesus refers to the Romans and the Greeks and the Egyptians of his time, saying that their rulers want to lord it over them, “and their great ones are tyrants over them”. But it is not to be so among you, he says to his disciples. There are to be no tyrants among the followers of Christ, even though, sadly and wrongly, there's been a fair spread of them down through history. Humility and service are the traits to be most valued in and by Christians, for humility and service is the very heart of God himself.

Yesterday we elected the 17 Canberrans who will be our rulers in local matters over the next four years. I respect and admire all those who are elected to public office, for their responsibilities are daunting, the sacrifices demanded of them are huge, their time is hardly ever their own and their human right to privacy is rarely recognised. I was relieved and encouraged by the overall tone of our election campaigns here in Canberra. The personal attacks were not near as strident or nasty as we see in other jurisdictions, by and large the

arguments were about policies not personalities, the level of respect was reassuring. Respect for others is an important element in personal humility.

There was another election this week. Australia will be a member for the next two years of the United Nations Security Council. One of our very knowledgeable church members reminded me that the very first President of the UN Security Council was an Australian who happened to be a member of this congregation here in Wesley. His name was Norman Makin, and at the time he was Australian ambassador to the United States, in fact the first ever representative to be designated as ambassador to the US. In 1946 he chaired the very first meetings of the Security Council.

Prior to that Norman Makin had been a member of the Australian Parliament from 1919, speaker of the House of Representatives and a Government Minister during the second world war. As speaker he was affirmed for his “even temperament and his courtesy to all members”. All through his adult life he was a member of the Methodist Church and a lay preacher. He came from humble beginnings, his parents were poor, he himself trained as a metal-worker. He was a member of the church here from the mid-1920s, before the first buildings were erected in 1930. He wrote the Prologue to the book “Living Stones”, the story of this church’s first 50 years. After his stint as ambassador to the US he was elected again as a member of Parliament, from South Australia, into the 1960s, and so ended up being a member of this congregation, on and off, for nearly 50 years.

Humility and service. You don’t have to be self-seeking, self-righteous, to make a mark in this world. Hunger for power, desire to be top dog, glorying in tyranny, have no part in the way of Christ, as they have no part in the nature of God. God is compassion, caring, self-giving, as we see from the life of his Son Jesus Christ – and we are called to follow the same way. Adam and Eve, Job, James and John, and countless people throughout human history, have failed to see what God is really like and how God wants us really to live. Humility, generosity, self-giving, service.

To the glory of God. Amen.