

15th September 2019

Preacher: Steven Cooper

Hymns: **690** The Church's one foundation
 453 Wash me clean in that cool river
 155 Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire
 615 Let love be real, in giving and receiving
 550 Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go

Readings: **Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28**
 1 Timothy 1:12-17
 Luke 15:1-10

“They were coming near ... to listen”

*Come, Holy Ghost, unlock the truth, thyself the key.
And Lord, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be
acceptable to you, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

“The highest and most profitable lesson is the true knowledge of ourselves. It is great wisdom to esteem ourselves nothing, and to think always well and highly of others.”

So wrote Thomas à Kempis, in one of the most significant contributions to Christian literature since the Bible itself, *The Imitation of Christ* – written in Latin in the fifteenth century, and translated and re-published by none other than our own John Wesley, in 1735.

“It is great wisdom to esteem ourselves nothing, and to think always well and highly of others.”

Some of you will know that I have just recently moved house, to come and join you in ministry here at Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission. Part of the experience of moving house is that, in the process of packing all of one's possessions into boxes and then unpacking them in a new home, all manner of trinkets and forgotten objects can show up. In my case, just the other day, rummaging through one of the many boxes at our house that are still to be unpacked, I came across this envelope from 2006. It's quite a distinctive envelope, with a Buckingham Palace postmark, and the royal coat of arms printed on the back, with the words 'Lord Chamberlain's Office'. Inside is a rather splendid card, headed with the Queen's insignia, which reads, “The Lord Chamberlain is commanded by Her Majesty to invite Mr Steven Cooper to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace on Tuesday 18th July 2006 from 4 to 6 pm.” ‘Commanded by Her Majesty’: in these constitutionally peculiar times, some might

say that it wouldn't go amiss for there to be a bit more *commanding* by Her Majesty; I couldn't possibly comment. But back to my point.

To receive such an invitation as this made me feel rather special. Of course, to be invited to something doesn't actually mean that I *am* special—just that I'm lucky: lucky to have been invited. But I'd be lying if I said, nonetheless, it didn't in some small way make me *feel* special; and that I was pleased to feel that way. I dare say I am not alone in the experience of it feeling good to feel special, to feel, in some way, highly esteemed. It is part of human nature to value the sense of being esteemed, and indeed we are encouraged, particularly in the context of twenty-first century Western culture, that *self-esteem* is a good thing: healthy, and proper, and important. And I would be the first to agree. Indeed, where individuals struggle with lack of self-esteem, I will work very hard to support them in recovering and developing that self-esteem. We are created in God's image, and it is right that we all recognise the extraordinary God-given value that each of us has, simply by virtue of being who we are.

And certainly in my experience of education, this was encouraged. We are encouraged to set our sights high, to celebrate achievement of goals. Outside of education, there are numerous self-help books available that focus on being the master of your own destiny—all of which serves to foster and build up a sense of personal value and purpose.

But all of this makes for a rather challenging and seemingly contrary basis on which to make sense of Thomas à Kempis's advice that we should *esteem ourselves nothing*—a sentiment reflective of the attitude of St Paul, in his words to his colleague Timothy that we have heard this morning: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost." That's what I want to think about this morning. How do we reconcile these apparently contradictory ideas, that go to the heart of our life, and our life as people of faith?

Well, to coin a phrase, it's all relative. We live in a very individualistic age. We are prone, in the West, to think in terms of self: self-sufficiency, self-improvement, personal destiny. I don't make any particular value judgment about that, but it is simply a fact that in Jesus's and Paul's time and culture, and indeed in Thomas à Kempis's, people just didn't think in those terms, in anything like the individualistic way that we tend to today. When Paul regards himself as the foremost of sinners, when Thomas à Kempis speaks of esteeming ourselves nothing, these notions are founded on a fundamental understanding of ourselves as existing in relation to others. Indeed 'foremost' is, by definition, a relative term. And, in fact, I do Thomas à Kempis a mischief to talk about 'esteeming ourselves nothing' if I do so divorced from the second half of that sentence, 'to think always well and highly of others'. They are not concerned with doing down our self-esteem in the individualistic sense of thinking we are of no intrinsic value, or that we should be flagellating ourselves for

how rubbish we are; but they are entirely concerned with how we view ourselves *relative* to how we view others.

Christianity itself has no real meaning except in the context of how we relate: to our fellow Christians, our fellow human beings, and to our world. As John Wesley put it, there is no holiness but social holiness. Christ himself is the embodiment of *God in relation to others*: God came to share in the midst of the world's life, in human affairs, to be amongst us. Indeed we should be wary of expressions of so-called 'Christianity' that place undue emphasis on self-improvement or personal prosperity. Christianity has, fundamentally, to do with how we relate to others: and in as far as it has to do with how we see ourselves, it has to do with this *in comparison to* how we see others, and thus how we respond to and relate to them.

Why have I been going on about Thomas à Kempis so much this morning? It's not merely out of the blue; it's not even just because of the store which our forebear Mr Wesley set by his work. What has caught my attention are the reflections of an altogether more recent theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who makes a lot of Thomas à Kempis, particularly in relation to those words from Paul's first letter to Timothy that we have been thinking about. Bonhoeffer wrote a book in the late 1930s called *Life Together*. It's well worth a read. He wrote it out of his experience as the head of a theological seminary, or ministerial training college: a place where Christians lived together, very much in community. As the title suggests, it is all about the business of how we live as Christians in relation to one another.

In relation to our passage from 1 Timothy, and following on from the quote of Thomas à Kempis that I have already shared, Bonhoeffer writes as follows:

'One extreme thing must be said. To forgo self-conceit and to associate with the lowly means, in all soberness and without mincing the matter, to consider oneself the greatest of sinners. ... It sounds like an exaggeration, like an untruth. Yet even Paul said of himself that he was the foremost of sinners; he said this specifically at the point where he was speaking of his service as an apostle. ... If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all. ... He who would serve his brother in the fellowship must sink all the way down to these depths of humility.'

Paul himself makes this clear. Regarding himself as the foremost of sinners—that is, relative to all others—he goes on to say to Timothy, "But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost," (or, you might say, because he regarded himself as the foremost) "Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." In other words, it was by relating to others with the attitude of humility that comes from regarding one's own sins as worse than any other's, that people were able to come to recognise Christ through Paul's own life and ministry.

In our world today, if we can achieve that level of humility—that attitude where we look at others in all their diversity, their various opinions and behaviours, and yes, their sinfulness, but always regarding our own sinfulness as the greatest—then we achieve something profoundly important. We achieve something that runs counter to the kinds of attitudes that are proving so destructive and divisive and counterproductive in our society at the moment: where people are so quick to devalue or ridicule those with whom they disagree or who see things differently, and where one's own position must be asserted, at all costs, and must dominate those whose position is different.

And I want to focus this morning on just one aspect of what that kind of humility looks like in practice. And that is in the business of *listening*. This is where the passage that we have heard from Luke's gospel comes in.

We have heard the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Lost Coin. There is much that I could say about those parables, and on some other occasion doubtless I will. But for now I'm going to focus on what it was that happened that prompted the complaint from the Pharisees and scribes, that led to Jesus telling them those two parables:

'Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

'Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.'

If we apply to ourselves Paul's example, to think of ourselves as the foremost of sinners, then we can identify in some way with the tax-collectors and sinners in our gospel incident here. 'Tax-collectors and sinners' is the gospel writers' description of these persons, and may not be how they would have branded themselves; but it would have been no secret to anyone that they were regarded in these terms, especially in the eyes of the religious authorities. These so-called tax-collectors and sinners would, I'm sure, have been very conscious of the way in which they were looked down on by the likes of the Pharisees and scribes; indeed, with the latter's grumbling, of which the gospel speaks, the disapproval would have been quite obvious. Clearly Jesus himself is someone whom these tax-collectors and sinners regarded as a person of religious authority: they came to listen to him. And given how negatively they would have been accustomed to be regarded by those in religious authority, I don't think it is a stretch to suggest that these tax-collectors and sinners were displaying real *humility* in coming near to Jesus, going out on a limb exposing themselves to the disapproval and the grumbings of those others gathered around, to listen to what he had to say.

Conscious of their sin, or at least of their sin in the eyes of the religious community, and moved to humility, what these persons do is to come near to Jesus, to *listen*,

and so to encounter—as the parables Jesus told demonstrate—a connection with him that Jesus himself speaks of as an occasion of *rejoicing*.

This listening is so important. As we come into contact with one another, as we relate to our neighbours and to others in our communities and in our world, as we come in humility—thinking of ourselves as the foremost of sinners—listening well to those voices that contrast with our own is one of the most important things we can do to counteract the fractiousness of our society, which in so many ways is characterised by refusal to listen or really to hear what the other has to say.

Jeremiah speaks of the destructive consequences of a nation living in a way that God, according to Jeremiah, describes in these terms: “My people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding.” To be stupid literally means not to listen, to be like a dumb animal, to wilfully close one’s ears or one’s senses to those voices that you really need to listen to. This sort of refusal to listen, to really take on board alternative voices to one’s own, runs to the heart of this nation’s current crisis around Brexit, for example.

This listening is also really important for us in the Methodist Church at this time, and indeed within our life together in Wesley’s Chapel and Leysian Mission, as we reckon together in the coming months with the Methodist Conference report on marriage and relationships, and with the diversity of faithful perspectives and experiences around marriage and relationships that exist within our shared life. This is something that was given very excellent attention at the London District Synod yesterday, and which we look forward to giving special focus to within this church community in the months ahead. Approached with humility and with real listening, it is an encounter that can be a blessing for us all.

Because, like the tax-collectors and the sinners in the gospel, when we really listen in a spirit of profound humility, we encounter Christ in the other; and it is indeed an occasion of rejoicing. And real listening is an active process, it is something we make an effort to do. The tax-collectors and the sinners didn’t just listen to Jesus: they were *coming near*, in order to do so properly. This, in fact, is something that comes across even more strongly in the original Greek of the gospel than in our English translation. If we translate Luke 15 verse 1 literally—‘Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him’—in terms of its Greek word order, it reads:

‘Now they were coming near—all the tax-collectors and sinners—to listen to him.’

That *coming near* is the first thing. Listening is not simply something that happens, it is something that we *do*.

And ultimately, this humility and this real attentive listening, go to *that which is at the very heart of our faith*, namely, to love. In the words on the wall behind me: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy

mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.”

Let us adopt that humility in relation to others that comes with reckoning our own sin the greatest of all. Let us, in that humility, really listen to what our neighbours, those different from us, have to say. In so doing, let us encounter Christ anew, who rejoices to find us. This may we do, out of love for God and love for our neighbour. “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end,” says the Lord. Let us be part, with God, of the *re-creation* of that which is so broken in our society today.

And in the words of St Paul: ‘To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.’