

# Learn and Grow with Humility

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 October 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Ruth Lambert

Pentecost 23 C

Psalm 65, Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18, Luke 18: 9-14

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I have now had my fifth operation over the last few years on my hands. These hands that have raised children, grandchildren with all the menial tasks that need doing to keep them clean, fed, dressed, safe etc etc. But they are also the hands used for writing, gardening, typing, sewing, mending, cleaning etc etc. It is from great frustration with locking joints, triggering fingers, painful cramping hands that I continue to learn humility. While adoring all five grandchildren, Annabelle aged nearly four is particularly attentive and verbally astute, when tears come to my eyes as I try to put the children's seat belts on before going to school and preschool says- *Nanna just use another finger*. And she is right I too can learn to use another finger rather than the middle finger which was triggering. Nannas can learn new ways of doing things with greater humility.

Humility allows us to keep our natural purity, our simplicity, like children, and simplicity of heart is itself, this purity of soul that allows us to retain our innocence. Humility is the basis of an honest, mature self-awareness that accepts ourselves as we are, without covering up, making excuses or blaming others. A mature self-knowledge depends on truth and honesty.

The theme for this year's October Mental Health Month is Learn and Grow. According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is *the state of well-being in which every individual with their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to their community*. We are being encouraged in this month to learn more about mental health and use that knowledge to grow personally and take control of one's mental well-being.

The statistics tell us that nearly half of all Australians will experience some form of mental illness during their lifetime, and those that don't will most likely know someone who does. But there's still a lot of stigma and confusion around the topic and that's where learning and growing comes in. This theme encourages us all to learn new and exciting things, as the very act of learning - especially for me and others with ageing brain cells - can have many positive outcomes on our mental health and wellbeing- no matter what we choose to learn about.

Our readings today Sirach, the Psalm and Luke all help us to learn and grow with humility. The Book of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) was penned about 180BC in Jerusalem. The book acted as a text for young wealthy students instructing them in the ways of wisdom. Sirach revealed the status of the Jewish capital under Syrian domination. Society was polarized, rich versus poor, Jew versus gentile. The powerful versus the weak. Sirach's proverbs and general advice sought to guide the reader's conduct through tenuous times.

One of the areas where public behaviour and private conduct merged was Temple worship. Many competing agendas of oppression, showy rituals or personal aggrandisements. Sirach tried to help the reader look at worship through the eyes of God. A humble heart. For humility allows one to treat others the way God treats them. Without partiality. No bribe or show of piety can replace a humble heart. God hears the prayer of the humble, those who place God first in their life. There is always an answer from God even if it takes time. Worship means we place ourselves fully before God, not to brag or manipulate but simply to be with God.

I do delight in being in this sanctuary by myself. I find it a very sacred and holding space. From time to time I find myself sitting in a pew and praising God, singing and saying prayers. But I also like witnessing the humility with which those who have responsibilities in preparation for our Sunday service arrive early in this place to clean up flowers, arrange the ones they have carefully selected in a vase, others practicing singing, warming up the organ, opening doors, arranging the worship objects on the centre table, preparing the morning tea. The list goes on - the 'gathering in' of ourselves, our lives with what helps us to worship of a Sunday morning in this sacred place.

As John Floyd has acknowledge in the eNews this week, the warmth, health and success of volunteer community organisations is dependent on the willingness and commitment of all its volunteers - I paraphrase your words, John while endorsing your words.

Psalms 65, a song of thanksgiving for earth's bounty can be divided into three sections. God is forgiver - showing mercy and kindness; deliverer - God's graciousness on behalf of all creation and provider - the community's relationship to God. The psalmist describes the movement of spirit giving a dutiful response to God for particular blessings, moving through awe at God's majesty and culminating in the joyous praise we experience in community.

The American poet, Mary Oliver's poem '*Varanasi*' from her 2012 book '*A Thousand Mornings*' is such a visual description of the humility, simplicity and devotion of the Indian people at the ceremony of light, the Aarati that Jane and I experienced on our trip to India last year.

*Early in the morning we crossed the ghat  
where fires are still smouldering.  
and gazed, with our Western minds, into the Ganges.  
A woman standing in the river up to her waist:  
she was lifting handfuls of water and spilling it  
over her body, slowly and many times,  
as if until there came some moment  
of inner satisfaction between her own life and the river's.*

*Then she dipped a vessel she had brought with her  
and carried it filled with water back across the ghat,  
No doubt to refresh some shrine near where she lives,  
For this is the holy city of Shiva, maker  
of the world, and this is his river.  
I can't say much more, except that it all happened  
in silence and peaceful simplicity, and something that felt like the bliss of a certainty of a  
life lived in accordance with that certainty.  
I must remember this, I thought as we fly back to America.  
Pray God I remember this.*

As many of you know I do find spiritual nourishment in walking at dawn, seeing the sunrise - feeling the expansiveness of the early light. Jane and I walked this morning, looking at Sculptures By The Sea, so I would encourage you all to go and have a look down there at Bondi round to Tamarama.

Jane and I had gone to the evening service on the Ganges with the priests swaying the lanterns and chanting their devotion to the Hindu deity, Mother Ganga, and we returned in the early morning to also witness not only the devotion, the early morning activities of bathing and purifying of the local people in the Ganges, but also those who had made their spiritual pilgrimage to Varanasi. The sacredness of their devotion was humbling and stays with us.

Moving on to today's gospel reading, who are you, a Pharisee or a tax collector? It is hard to read this parable without placing oneself in one role or the other or, like me, hearing oneself in both people. Which of us has not felt a bit self-satisfied on a Sunday morning, thinking: *"O God, I thank Thee that I am not like those other people: my next door neighbour who is enjoying a round of golf right now instead of coming to worship; my friend in the other political party who does not understand God's will for our nation; or even that scruffy taxi driver sitting two pews over. I am here every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening, I give faithfully and I serve on three important church committees."* End of thought bubble...

For some of us, it is only when we mess up in a big way that we gain the humility of the tax collector. Those in recovery programs for drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling to name a few, call it *'hitting rock bottom'*. Major mistakes or griefs are sometimes what brings us to see our need for God's grace and forgiveness, and come to know the healing nature of humility. I am reminded that there is a service at 3pm this afternoon for- Blue Knot in support of the 1 in 4 (estimated 5 million) Australian adult survivors of childhood trauma and abuse. I'd encourage you, after going to the 3pm service here, you are very welcome to join the celebratory 25 year anniversary concert for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir at Paddington Town hall at 5.30pm.

When my son, Tom took his own life in March 2012, I was still the state manager for the school counselling/psychological services of the department of education. I had risen through merit selection over many years to be at the top of the bureaucracy in my area of expertise - psychology and education - I had administrative and professional practice responsibilities for a staff of over 900 full time school counselling positions in the NSW state service. I had authored many articles on serious incident management, including suicide prevention for children and adolescents till they left school - at 18/19 years of age.

Tom was 26, living at home with his dad and mates, working as a youth pastor in a Pentecostal church - no known history of suicidal behaviours or thoughts, drug addiction etc, etc. Besides the longing, the missing Tom, the walking through the valley of the shadow of death, I have spent many hours, as has his father and his two beautiful sisters - and as I am sure all of you who have lost a loved one to suicide have, looking for an explanation or numbers of explanations - in my professional psychological readings, in studies on risk taking personalities, in supervision/support or lack of for youth workers in Pentecostal churches, in concussion studies, talking to research professionals - the long term effects of sustained concussion incidents, in our relationship with Tom over his lifetime. The process of 'not knowing' is incredibly humbling, very often brings me to my knees and finds me weeping.

On a day to day basis I do thank Tom for the wonderful 26 years we had - all the fun, the antics, the sport, the discussions, his unconditional love. I just wish the ride with Tom here was for longer and I live with the mystery. It is the only way I have any peace. But, like the slogan for Mental Health Month, I will always be learning and growing in my understandings of Tom and suicide.

The current Man Up series on the ABC has provided some insights into emotional intelligence and the difficulties men in general have in communicating their feelings and seeking help. As the commentator said of his friend - if he could do it – suicide - anyone can - what we also say about Tom. Some very useful initiatives have been set up in some industries, such as with construction workers, not previously known for being a caring/sharing profession where the statistics for accidental death/suicide are amongst our nations' highest. Important conversations are being had - this helps take away the shame and stigma.

In my retirement I have taken to working a couple of days a week casually as a school counsellor in Shoalhaven High School and it is wonderful to be back in the field assisting students, their families and teachers with positive mental health programs. I have always enjoyed field work, I didn't go up '*the bureaucratic greasy pole*' to get away from face to face work but to implement systemic change. In fact it keeps me in touch with the current pressures on young people and translating psychological research into practical ways to build resilience in the community. On a day to day basis many of the boys I see, it is their behaviour - often violent, attention seeking that gives me an insight into what's going on in their families, the grief they really feel about their poor relationships with men - and their dads in particular.

Together with some school staff, I am running a *Seasons for Growth* course not dissimilar to the adolescent high school program on Man Up on last Tuesday evening, with a number of students this term who have experienced the loss of a significant other in recent years in which we will help them in developing their resilience and capacities to cope.

This parable in Luke today tells us about ourselves as followers of Jesus. If it makes us twinge with remorse at the thought of acting like the self-righteous Pharisee, it also inspires us with the humility of the tax collector. Jesus challenges us to avoid trusting in our own efforts at loving but rather to humble ourselves before a merciful and loving God. Notice that the followers also leave their regrets. This is affirming, since the humility of the tax collector does not require wallowing in self-loathing. The liberation of knowing that God is merciful and loving means that we can leave behind our reliance on our achievements in work or in our faith community.

On its face, this seems a simple story that encourages humility and condemns spiritual pride. How does one reflect on humility without succumbing to spiritual pride? Surely this is one of the greatest spiritual paradoxes. '*Be humble!*' As soon as we have arrived at a suitable state of humility, we are tempted to take pride in our accomplishment.

As the Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan puts it, we understand humility by purifying our egos/our personalities with gentleness, self-control, tolerance and by forgiveness. In the mental plane, the desire to be proud, the desire to be vain, to show conceit, to show superiority over others all come from the ego. We are encouraged to be wise by learning humility that the ego gives a false idea of greatness but through the effacement of our ego we can have true greatness. Humility, humility is the principal thing that needs to be learnt in training the ego/the personality, so that with every thought and action our hearts are filled with Divine Light and Love.

We see this humility with the Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama. Towards the end of Magda Szubanski's memoir released earlier this year entitled '*Reckoning*', she is trying to work out the morality of her father's actions in Poland during World War 2. Working out how to frame a question to the Dalai Lama re what the reckoning will be for her Dad, now that he is dead for the '*crime against humanity*' committed by her father. But instead she asks: *what is the most important thing to be teaching our children?* And the Dalai Lama replies 'kindness' always kindness. This is quite poignant as the reader realizes, like Magda that her father amongst many other heart-qualities was indeed a man of kindness, despite what he had had to do.

The story of the '*Giving Tree*' is a story about a tree – and she gives shade and light in the early part of the book and then, as she gets older, the little boy wants to make a boat and takes bark; then as the tree gets older, it gets chopped down to build a house; and then, towards the end of the book, she's just a stump in the ground, just a stump, but she's still giving somewhere to sit. A bit like all of us to what we do through all our lives: being and giving.

So it's a beautiful metaphor for us all in humility, kindness and life (us being the trees) having meaning at every stage - learning and growing. Indeed if you are like me - into trees - lying on the ground and looking through the tracery of the branches and the spaces between the branches, helps open the mind and heart. I love the image that's on the cover of our liturgy sheet today.

I like rolling on the ground in the autumn leaves. I've been known to tell people to stop the car, even at my grand age of over 60, and get out and roll around in the leaves – most embarrassing to the kids, they always tell me! But, you know, sometimes you've got to smell them to enjoy them, as well as the colours and what you see.

ABC radio this mental health month is encouraging us to boost our wellbeing - through learning a new skill, doing more exercise, looking up into the trees, appreciating their trunks, the bark, their shade, being kinder to others, and to oneself.

Celebrate, sing your song, dance your dance and take time in each present moment to offer sincere thoughts of reverence, awe and gratefulness. Be grateful for whoever and whatever comes through the windows of your life. Before you ask God for what you want, first thank God for what you have. If you truly want to be an instrument of love, kindness and peace, then take time each day to welcome God into your life and give thanks.