

Honouring God

Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15

Leith Fisher, late minister of Wellington Parish Church in Glasgow, tells of a time when as an angry young divinity student, training for the ministry, he once preached to a sleepy, midsummer seaside congregation. His text was our one from Mark's Gospel, "in the full might and majesty of the Authorised Version, 'This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me...Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.'" Leith writes that he was sure he addressed the congregation with impertinence, upbraiding the people for the 'sins' of conventionality and complacency and visiting on them his own ecclesiastical frustrations and prejudices. He wasn't asked back!¹

How do we honour God? How do we ensure that all that we are is a true reflection of our striving to be the best that we are able. Not being perfect but attempting to be the Child of God we have been shaped and enabled to be.

What is the difference between right and wrong in Christian living? What are the outer and inner marks of being a faithful Christian in the way that we behave and treat others, and treat God? In other words, how do we honour God?

The Psalmist wants our hearts to overflow with goodness, and our tongues to speak and sing God's praises in honour and joy. But most of us will know that what we have felt and said and done in this last week will, at times, be very far from this.

Mark's story begins with Jesus spoiling for a fight with the Pharisees, the teachers and interpreters of God's law in those days. The issue had to do with the Purity Code in Judaism, about what was clean, and what was not. It also had to do with the contrast between the exclusive fellowship the

Pharisees believed to be the only way to honour God, set against the open and inclusive community that Jesus outlined and practised.

The story begins with the disciples' dirty hands – nothing to do with hygiene but with the elaborate ritual of purification before eating. Jesus and His followers had just been involved in the feeding of the 5,000. There was no way the over-elaborate food laws of the Pharisees would have been followed. The rituals had become an exclusion technique, especially for the poor. Whereas with Jesus, if you were hungry or thirsty, you came to Him, to eat and to drink and to find not only nourishment, but welcome. As Jesus might have said: which practice, do you think, most honoured God?

What matters to Jesus, and to those who follow Jesus, is not simply an outward observance. What matters is the heart, the devotion, the motivation within. What is the point of the fine words if your heart is far from God? In hearing You praise God and pray to God, will people also see you honouring God in the way you behave, in the way you treat others, in the priorities you have set for your life? If cleanliness is truly next to godliness, it's not just the state of your hearts that matter. It is the state of your mind, your mouth, and your heart. If you want to honour God, those are the parts of your life that you need to attend to in faith.

Perhaps even more fundamental than that Christians find themselves thrown on to the basic commandments of what we are called to believe and to put into practice. If you want to honour God, You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength; you are to love your neighbour as yourself. All our traditions; all the things that we cherish and have grown up with; and any new practice that is introduced into the life of the Church is to be measured against these living, breathing, challenging precepts. If we are desirous of honouring God, do we

love God with all that we are and have; do we love those around us, the lovely and the unlovely, not more than ourselves, not less than ourselves, but *as* ourselves?

At the 9.30am early service I mentioned a quotation from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. You might be surprised that I have always liked this quotation. *"I will honour Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year."* After his life of meanness and misery, and worse, Ebenezer Scrooge had an Epiphany not simply about what Christmas was about, but about what a good life, well-lived, had to be about. The joy of giving and receiving; the recognition of the needs of others and doing something about them; the sharing and welcoming and including. Important at Christmas, and surely important all the year round. Honouring Christmas has to do with so much more than respecting the customs and traditions. It has to do with the spirit of love and graciousness and generosity. It has to do with honouring the Christ-child, at the heart of Christmas, and at the heart of our incarnational faith. A faith that needs hearts and hands and feet. A faith that needs prayer in action. A faith that transforms life as much as we are able. A faith that honours God.

By our honouring God, with all that we are and by caring for all God's children and creation, "we are holding a space for God, the God Who is never far off, the God Who inhabits all space and time. And that includes times of stillness: times when it seems that absolutely nothing is happening, times when unsee, unforced and unperceived, God is bringing about our renewal."ⁱⁱ

Honouring God. To honour is to value, to cherish, to respect. Honour means doing what you believe to be right, it has to do with integrity and principles. What, and who do we honour in the Church? I have written in the September magazine that the Kirk Session, our local church governing body, is looking to compile a compendium of the different jobs and volunteering that are done around our Church. It is very clear very how much is done by volunteers around the life of our church. Alongside our deeply appreciated church staff who also add so much to the texture

and shape of congregational life, so many volunteers are at work in so many areas of the Church. People on door duty to welcome, the rotas for coffee, the Baby and Toddler Group, Sunday Club and crèche, Sunday morning readers, the children who say the opening prayer, magazine editor, car rota, flower arrangers, Morningside Hope helpers, concert advertisers, choir members, to say nothing of the Session Clerk, Treasurer, elders on the Kirk Session, pastoral visiting group and so many more.

The metric by which we measure a congregation's life can be set in many ways. Numbers attending and money donated are but two. But the real heart of a congregation, which is the way I think we should always measure a Church's life, is its people; and its people honouring God by what they give of themselves. In a world where people have many choices throughout the week, and especially on Sundays, it is a sign of good health that we still have so many working together in our shared life. Of course there could be more, and there is always room for more, don't wait to be asked! But looking out Sunday by Sunday and dropping in to the Church during the week I see what God is enabling us to do within our parish and community. We are not a bubble isolated from the lives of those who live around us, or a closed club where only a privileged few are welcome. We are a parish church, and our doors, and hearts, are open. Through who we are, and through what we do, we are honouring God.

And if you are uncomfortable about blowing your own trumpet, let me do it for you.

Honouring God is our aspiration. To be a better person for God's ways. To be more loving, more faithful, more generous, more active for justice and peace. To stand for high ideals and goals, even if we sometimes fall short, but we strive nonetheless.

A story is told of a self-centred individual who became concerned about other people's negative image of him. He spoke to his minister, who proposed he try, for one month, simply pretending

to be a different person, one who cared deeply about the welfare of others. He was to live, in effect, as a hypocrite, pretending to be something he was not, to be a far better person than he actually was. By the end of the four weeks the generosity, concern and selflessness had become so captivating that he was no longer pretending. He found a way to honour God, and to honour his fellow human beings. And it stuck.

How might you honour God in the week that lies ahead?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Leith Fisher, Will you follow Me?, p102*

ⁱⁱ *Neil Glover, Finding our Voice, p178*