

## Sermon - pain, guilt, shame & humility

Based on: Luke 14.1-14

### Pride and humility

- In last Sunday's gospel reading, Jesus healed a crippled woman in the synagogue on the sabbath.
- When the synagogue leader told people to seek healing only on work days, Jesus put him and his colleagues to shame by holding them to account for their hypocritical attitude.
- He pointed out that they were effectively wanting to withhold God's blessing on the sabbath - the day specifically meant for celebrating people's faith relationship with God.
- Today's gospel reading starts off with a similar incident - except this time it's a man suffering from dropsy, or oedema.
- And instead of being in a synagogue, Jesus is a guest at a leading Pharisee's home.
- The attending pharisees and lawyers watch Jesus to try to figure out what he is up to.
- The lawyers referred to here are biblical scholars who are qualified to interpret God's law, as found in the scriptures.
- Jesus then gives them another teaching, based directly on his immediate observations about how prideful some of the guests are, in choosing places that reflect the superior status they think they deserve.
- And he warns that this example of pride might lead to them being shamed by being asked to move to less honourable positions.
- Jesus makes a direct contrast between pride and humility, and teaches that to avoid shame one should practise humility.
- Indeed, the prophets of the Old Testament call upon God's people over and over again to practice humility in engaging with those who the world regards as inferior.
- Over the last few years I've been observing and reflecting on how secular society engages with shame and humility - or, more accurately, *avoids* engaging with both shame and humility.
- And how Jesus calls on us as his disciples to witness to an attitude that is different to how the world operates.

### Pain, guilt, and shame

- So today I want to share some of these reflections about three aspects of our lives that we try to avoid: pain, guilt, and shame.
- We avoid these things, because they hurt us, and we quite sensibly don't like being hurt.
- However, we have been created to feel pain, to feel guilt, and to feel shame, for good reasons.
- If we don't properly understand the purpose of pain, of guilt, and of shame, then we're less likely to benefit from them.
- And if we think that the feeling of pain itself is wrong, that the feeling of guilt itself is wrong, that the feeling of shame itself is wrong, then we are likely to have an unhelpful attitude towards these sensations.

### The purpose of pain

- Let's look at each one, starting with pain.
- Here I am only using pain in the physical sense, for example if we accidentally cut or burn ourselves.
- Pain in itself is neither good nor bad - it is just a signalling mechanism.
- It tells us that our body has been, or is being, damaged.
- If we grab hold of something that is too hot, the pain tells us that, so that we can do the sensible thing and let go.

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- And if the pain continues, it is telling us to put some ice on it, and maybe apply some antiseptic cream, and bandage it to aid with the healing.
- The pain itself is not the problem: the pain hasn't damaged us, but is a very useful signal that lets us know that the integrity of our physical body has been damaged, and that we'd better do something about it.
- When something goes wrong with this signalling mechanism and we don't feel pain when we should, there is a good chance that our body becomes more badly - perhaps permanently - damaged, and we might even die.
- So while it is important for us to dislike feeling pain, we also need to value pain for what it tells us, so that we can attend to the damage it is signalling to us.
- Now I'm not going to pretend that constant pain is helpful - it is not, and can be seriously debilitating in itself.
- Let us just stay with the simplest understanding of pain, in the way I've described it, because this serves as a useful pattern with which to engage with guilt, and shame.

### The purpose of guilt

- Guilt functions the same way as pain does.
- Guilt in itself is neither good nor bad - it is just a signalling mechanism.
- It tells us that our character - or moral integrity - has been damaged.
- We each have our own sense of right and wrong, and when we do what we believe to be right, then we maintain our integrity.
- If we do something that we think within ourselves is wrong, then we feel guilty.
- Guilt lets us know that our moral integrity has been damaged.
- The guilt itself is not the problem: the guilt itself hasn't damaged our moral integrity, but is a useful signalling mechanism that tells us that our character has been damaged, and that we'd better do something about it.
- Jesus tells us what to do: to ask for, and receive, forgiveness.
- Jesus was always quick to forgive people's sins as a way of restoring their moral integrity, of making them whole again.
- And we have the opportunity in every church service to confess the damage to ourselves that our guilt alerts us to, and to ask God to make us whole again.
- The problem comes when we wrongly perceive guilt itself as bad, and dull its impact by ignoring it.
- It leads to a decay of our own moral integrity, and a reduced ability to ask for and receive God's compassionate forgiveness.
- It also makes it harder for us to exercise the same compassionate forgiveness towards other people.
- So while it is important for us to dislike feeling guilt, we also need to value guilt for what it tells us, so that we can attend to the damage it is signalling to us - in exactly the same way that physical pain helps to keep our bodies safe.

### The purpose of shame

- Shame functions the same way as both pain and guilt do.
- Shame in itself is neither good nor bad - it is just a signalling mechanism.
- Just as pain signals that our physical integrity has been damaged, and guilt signals that our moral integrity has been damaged, so shame signals that our social integrity has been damaged.
- We have a sense of our own social integrity, of how we function within the communities we are part of.
- We each have a sense of our own value and role in society.

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- That enables us to understand our status in society - which will vary according to whatever any particular society does and does not value.
- For example, in the USA, billionaires are regarded as having high status, whereas in Finland being a teacher gives you high status: different communities have different values.
- And church communities have their own social values - which are hopefully the values of Jesus.
- The key aspect to focus on here is not about the values of our society, but the social integrity each of us has - as I said, how each of us functions within each community that we are part of.
- If we do something that we think negatively impacts on our value and role in society, then we feel shame.
- When Jesus called out his Pharisee colleagues as being hypocritical, they felt shame.
- Shame lets us know that our social integrity has been damaged.
- The shame itself is not the problem: shame doesn't damage our social integrity, but is a useful signalling mechanism that lets us know that our place - our perceived value and role - has been damaged, and that we'd better do something about it.
- If we make a mistake and get something wrong that others were counting on us to undertake responsibly, then we quite rightly feel shame.
- The helpful response to our feeling of shame is to acknowledge to others that we got it wrong, and then do what we can to put it right.
- Simply put, we say: 'Oops! I'm sorry - I got that wrong. Let me try to fix it.'
- Hopefully we also feel guilty, which tells us that part of attending to the matter is confessing and asking for forgiveness.
- Those Pharisees that Jesus called out could simply have learned from Jesus' teaching, and recognised that they needed to adjust how they perceived God's purpose for the sabbath day.
- In John's gospel there is the story of the Pharisee Nicodemus, who learns to shift in his thinking and attitude.
- The problem comes when we wrongly perceive shame itself as bad, and dull its impact by ignoring it or avoiding it.
- It leads to a decay of our own social integrity, and reduces our real value and role in the community - regardless of what our secular society values.
- It also makes it harder for us to exercise the same compassionate forgiveness towards other people when they fail to do the right thing and acknowledge that.
- Furthermore, we then avoid holding each other to account for things that each of us is responsible for, because we don't want to cause other people to feel shame.
- However, while it is important for us to dislike feeling shame, we also need to value shame for what it tells us, so that we can attend to the damage it is signalling to us.

### Pride and humility

- The biggest obstacle to attending to shame beneficially is pride.
- When we are prideful, we refuse to admit to whatever we might have done, or failed to do, that is causing us to feel shame.
- Instead we blame the people who are holding us to account, and accuse them of making us lose face, of feeling ashamed - as if that was a bad thing to be made to feel.
- We lose sight of the fact that shame itself is like pain - it is not bad in itself, but just a signalling mechanism.
- When we refuse to engage with shame, then it should be a clear sign that we have a real issue with pride.
- Holy Scripture tells us repeatedly not to be proud, but to be humble.

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- Jesus himself instructs us to practise humility.
- And the very symbol of our faith is fundamentally a symbol of humility.
- When we wear or display the cross, we are showing others that we value humility.
- Jesus had no pride, but was humble - humble to the point of accepting the shame of being arrested and falsely found guilty, the shame of being publicly flogged, the shame of being treated like a criminal and then killed as if he were a traitor to the state.
- Jesus humbly took on the shame of the people who were too proud to acknowledge that they had got it wrong.

### Following Jesus humbly

- And, strangely, this is good news for us.
  - Jesus shows us the value of engaging with shame, and learning how to be humble.
  - It is because we are his disciples, and strive to follow his way of humility, that we do not need to be afraid of shame.
  - When we practise the humility of Jesus, then we are walking in his way.
  - Then we are able more effectively to practise his way of sacrificial love.
  - We are better able to continue his mission in the world.
  - We are better able to maintain our own moral and social integrity.
  - We are better able to be both whole people, and holy people.
  - We are better able to witness the gospel to the world.
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- So just as we value the symbol of the cross, may we embrace the humility of Christ that it represents, and follow him truly.
  - As Jesus said: *'all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'* (Luke 14.11)