

SERMON

"HUMILITY"

I am currently Treasurer of the Council of Christians and Jews, New South Wales. When I was in England I was a member of the Sheffield Branch of the Council of Christians and Jews. As a member of CCJ I received the journal Common Ground - which I have to admit often remained unread apart from a cursory glance through its pages. However, one issue of Common Ground contained an article on "Humility" by the then Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations, Jonathan Sacks. I read that article, and I want to share it with you as my sermon today.

I don't feel any need to apologise to anyone who may have read that article, because anyone who has read it would know that it is well worth sharing with as many people as possible.

How virtues change. Moses, the greatest hero of the Jewish tradition, is described in the Bible as "a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the Earth." By today's standards he was clearly wrongly advised. He should have hired an agent, sharpened up his image, let slip some calculated indiscretions about his conversations with the Almighty and sold his story to the press for a six-figure sum.

With any luck, he might have landed up with his own television chat show, dispensing wisdom to those willing to bare their souls to the watching millions. He would have had his fifteen minutes of fame. Instead he had to settle for the lesser consolation of three thousand years of moral influence.

Humility is the orphaned virtue of our age. Charles Dickens dealt it a mortal blow in his portrayal of the unctuous Uriah Heep, the man who kept describing himself as "the humblest person going".

The real death of humility however, came about a century later, with the threatening anonymity of mass culture alongside the loss of neighbourhoods and congregations. A community is a place of friends. Urban society is a landscape of strangers.

Yet there is an irrepressible human urge for recognition. So a culture emerged out of the various ways of "making a statement" to people we do not know, but who, we hope, will somehow notice. Beliefs ceased to be things confessed in prayer and became slogans emblazoned on T-shirts. A comprehensive repertoire developed of signalling individuality, from personalised car number-plates to "in your face" dressing and designer labels worn on the outside not within. You can trace an entire cultural transformation in the shift from renown to fame to celebrity to being famous for being famous. The creed of our age is: "If you've got it, flaunt it." Humility - being humble - did not stand a chance.

This is a shame. Humility, true humility, is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all virtues. It does not mean undervaluing yourself. Rather, it signals valuing other people. It signals a certain openness to life's grandeur and a willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it.

Jonathan Sacks wrote that he learned the meaning of humility from his father. His father had moved to the United Kingdom at the age of five, fleeing persecution in Poland. His family was poor and he had to leave school at the age of 14 to go to work and help to support them. What education he had was largely self-taught. Yet he loved excellence in whatever field or form it came. He had a passion for classical music and painting; he had impeccable taste in literature. He was an enthusiast. He had the capacity to admire.

Jonathan Sacks wrote that his father's capacity to admire was what he so cherished in him.

He wrote:

- That, I think, is the greater part of humility, the capacity to be open to something greater than oneself. False humility is the pretence that one is small. True humility is the consciousness of standing in the presence of greatness, which is why it is the virtue of the prophets, those who feel most vividly the nearness of God.

As a young man, full of questions about faith, Jonathan Sacks travelled to the United States of America, where, he had heard, there were outstanding rabbis. He met many, but he also had the privilege of meeting the greatest Jewish leader of his generation, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Rabbi Schneerson was the heir to the dynastic leadership of Jewish mystics. He had escaped from Europe to New York during the Second World War, and had turned the tattered remnants of his flock into a worldwide movement.

He was one of the outstanding charismatic leaders of the time. There were many stories - some of them verging on the miraculous - about his extraordinary leadership. Young Jonathan Sacks resolved to meet this great, renowned Rabbi Schneerson if he possibly could. He did manage to meet him. And was utterly surprised.

He wrote:

He was certainly not charismatic in any conventional sense. Quiet, self-effacing, understated, one might hardly have noticed him had it not been for the reverence in which he was held by his disciples. That meeting, though, changed my life. He was a world-famous figure. I was an anonymous student from 3,000 miles away. Yet in

his presence I seemed to be the most important person in the world. He asked me about myself; he listened carefully; he challenged me to become a leader, something I had never contemplated before. Quickly it became clear to me that he believed in me more than I believed in myself.

As I left the room, it occurred to me that it had been full of my presence and his absence. Perhaps

that is what listening is, considered as a religious act. I knew then that greatness is measured by what we efface ourselves towards. There was no grandeur in his manner; neither was there any false modesty. He was serene, dignified, majestic; a man of transcending humility who gathered you into his embrace and taught you to look up.

True virtue does not need to advertise itself. That is why the aggressive packaging of personality is so sad. It speaks of loneliness - the profound, endemic loneliness of a world without relationships of fidelity and trust. It testifies ultimately to a loss of faith, a loss of that knowledge (so precious to previous generations) that beyond the visible surfaces of this world is a Presence who knows us, loves us, and takes notice of our deeds.

Humility is more than just a virtue. It is a glorious revelation of the human spirit. It is a form of perception, a language in which the "I" is silent so that we can hear the "Thou", the unspoken call beneath human speech, the still small voice, the Divine whisper within all that moves, the voice of otherness that calls us to redeem its loneliness with the touch of love. Humility is what opens us to the world.

And does it matter that it no longer fits the confines of our age?

The truth is that moral beauty, like music, always moves those who can hear beneath the noise. Virtues may be out of fashion, but they are never out of date. The things that call attention to themselves are never interesting for long, which is why our attention span grows shorter year by year.

I finish with the closing half-paragraph of Rabbi Sacks' article:

Humility - the polar opposite of "advertisements for myself" --- never fails to leave its afterglow. We know when we have been in the presence of someone in whom the Divine presence breathes. We feel affirmed, enlarged, and with good reason. For we have met someone who, not taking himself or herself seriously at all, has shown us what it is to take with utmost seriousness that which is not I.

Amen.

"Humility" - by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.
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