

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Jesus the Challenger Part 6

3rd March 2019

Luke 17:1-10

Philippians 2:1-11

When I was growing up, if any of us children got a bit uppity, a bit inclined to boast about ourselves or our achievements, my father would quietly murmur, “Humility, and how I achieved it,” as if he were quoting the title of a famous book. Somehow it always took the wind out of our sails.

The sayings of Jesus which we read this morning have that theme of humility running through them. The challenge to his disciples, so to us, is to live humble lives – and although that sounds like a fairly unspectacular challenge, it is its very modesty which makes it difficult. Jesus is issuing these challenges to his disciples while he is on his way to Jerusalem, going to meet his fate and finish his work. These days with his friends are very precious and important, and he knows that they will not always be able to meet his challenges and live his ways. He knows that just as life is not easy for him, so there will be difficulties for them.

He pictures the life of faith as a journey or a race – and an event in which you need to put one step firmly before the next. Ideally you will go on step after step with no problem at all, but in fact occasions for stumbling are sure to arise. There will be times in life when we could go wrong, maybe even when we will go wrong. We will stumble in our walk with God, turning our ankle or falling flat on our faces. None of us are immune to stumbles, and perhaps those who seem to be travelling the swiftest, those who are running out in front, may stumble and fall the hardest. The disciples are being trained as leaders, and this is a warning to leaders as much as to anyone. We are none of us immune from stumbling in our walk with God. And Jesus knows it.

Our stumbles can be forgiven. We can be picked up and put back on our feet by the God who loves us, and indeed we will be if we ask. But while knowing that

none of us is immune from tripping up, we should live in such a way that we do not become a stumbling block for others. It is one thing to have a wobble in your faith and your following, but it is another to cause someone else to fall, either by what you do or say or by what you fail to do or say. Jesus shows how seriously he views that by the image he uses – that it would be better to put a millstone on like a necklace and be tossed into the sea than to be the cause of someone else’s stumble.

He goes on to show the most likely cause of making someone else stumble – which is lack of true forgiveness. Jesus is not saying that his followers should ignore faults when they can’t help seeing them in themselves or in others. No, when wrong is obvious it must be named, otherwise the church, the community of believers, becomes open to the charge of hypocrisy – remember that Jesus first and greatest challenge is to live with consistency. As a community of people who seek in Jesus to live God’s way, we do have to root out things that are wrong – actions, words and attitudes. But the question is how we do it. We are to do it with humility and forgiveness.

On Tuesday of this week, one of the news headlines was that an Australian Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church had been convicted of child abuse in a civil court. This man, Cardinal Pell, had always been known for his rigid and hard-line attitude to those accused of such offenses. Amongst the comments I saw was one from Pope Francis, who said, “Behind rigidity something always lies hidden, in many cases a double life.” Hypocrisy is greatest in people and institutions which use condemnation of others as a screen for their own questionable behaviour. Jesus says that we are to set a person right with forgiveness. And he doesn’t mean the kind of “forgiveness” which allows the forgiver to place him or herself on the moral high ground and feel good about themselves, the kind of “forgiveness” which means that you can hold yourself over the other. No, he says that we must forgive over and over, even seven times in one day, and always remembering that none of us is immune from stumbling, any of us can fall.

And this is hard, and the disciples knew that. They are aghast when they think of what this implies, and they cry out “Increase our faith!” But it is not more faith that is needed, but a better sight of God. Even a tiny bit of faith can do immense things, if our vision of God is true. What we need to take up Jesus’ challenge of humility is not great faith, but faith in a great God. Faith is like a window through which you can see something. What matters is not the size of the window – a huge plate glass affair or a leper’s squint – so long as it is God that through your faith you are looking out on. If you are looking out on the

creator God who loves his creation, who tends us, who lifts us up when we fall, who forgives and forgive sand forgives, who in Jesus gives himself to die for us – if you are looking out through your faith on that God, active in Jesus and the Spirit, then the tiniest peep-hole of a window will give you access to all of God’s power. But if it is God’s power it can only be used for God’s purposes, not our own. When we peer through the window of faith and see God, and remember all that God does for us, then forgiving in humility not in pride, forgiving over and over, forgiving because there but for the grace of God go we, will not seem so impossible.

And Jesus wants us to know that when we do these things, when we are careful not to make others stumble, when we are able to name someone’s wrong in love and forgive and forgive and forgive, even seven times a day, it is nothing remarkable. It may feel like a huge achievement, but it is nothing remarkable, it only means that we are doing what we ought, living as we ought, serving as we ought. If we want to draw attention to what we have done, then it would be appropriate to murmur my Father’s spurious book title again, “Humility, and how I achieved it!”

When we are able to go quietly about our lives, walk our pilgrimage, run our race in the steadfast, loving, forgiving way to which we are called, and if we realise that we have done so, it is not a reason to stop what we are doing, stop our service, take a break and relax. In fact, most often we will never know when we have made progress in these areas. It is far more likely that you will see and feel your own stumbles, the twists of the ankle, the grazing of the knee, than that you will be aware of reasons for self-congratulation or of times when you have got it right. When we get it right, we are not thinking about ourselves at all, but of God and of others. And such is the elusive nature of humility that almost by definition, when you are aware that you have managed to prevent a stumbling or to forgive in the right way, the humble way, you will lose our humility and open the door to pride.

But do not despair, for we serve a loving God. We serve a God, *the* God, who in Jesus shows us how he loves and leads and tends and forgives. And although when we manage to serve him in the right spirit we have done nothing remarkable, although we can never serve well enough to deserve that he should say to us – “Come on, sit down and eat with me,” yet such is his love that he does say this.

Jesus is talking to his disciples here as servants, and our task is to serve. But we know that later, he will tell them that he no longer calls them servants, but friends. And it is as his friends that Jesus invites us to sit with him at table – to

come as we do today to remember his love and all that in pure humility he gave for our salvation in giving his body and his blood on the cross; to come as we do today to know his presence as we take the bread and wine and as we acknowledge our brothers and sisters around us, who are also the body of Christ. We have done nothing to deserve this, and we do not come to the table with him conscious of our rectitude, but because he invites us and loves us and forgives us.

This is the table, not of the righteous,
but of the poor in spirit.

It is made ready for those who love God
and who want to love God more.

So come, you who have much faith and you who have little,
You who have been here often

and you who have not been for a long time or ever before,
You who have tried to follow and all of us who have failed.

Come to this table, not because you must but because you may,
not because you are strong, but because you are weak.

Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come,
but because you need mercy and help.

Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you.

These are the gifts of God for the People of God.

Christ invites everyone to be known and fed here.