

## SMALL GROUP NOTES

Love is Humble : John 13: 1-17

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A few weeks ago Larry was telling us about his favourite film: "The Blues Brothers". Well one of my favourites is "Bruce Almighty".

Bruce Nolan is a very discontented TV reporter who thinks he's always given the worse news stories. At the end of a particularly bad day he rants against God, blaming him for everything going wrong. He then receives a mysterious job offer and is invited to turn up at an office. When he gets there however there's no-one around except the cleaner. Bruce exchanges the odd comment with him whilst he tries to find the mystery person who's offered him the job. Eventually, after some confusion and bewilderment, the cleaner reveals himself as God and offers him **his job** with all his power. The result is hilarious – sheer chaos and finally a good, thought provoking message.

But its interesting that the film initially depicts God as an office cleaner, sweeping the floors. The Almighty, the Creator of the universe, revealing himself to someone as an ordinary person, doing humble, menial work. For many people watching the film its funny because it seems ridiculous. Why should God choose to show up like that? But, actually, that's the gospel. Millions of people who've seen that film have heard something of the gospel though they probably didn't realise it. The Word who became flesh washed his disciples' feet and said *"I am among you as one who serves"..."The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many"*.

Christianity is full of paradoxes: *"Whoever wants to save his life must lose it"..."The first shall be last and the last shall be first"*, *"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant"*. Everything is turned upside down. Kingdom values and worldly values are opposite. And where do we stand? What are our real values?

A friend told me a story of what happened in his church one Christmas Eve at Midnight Communion. It's a wealthy area of Surrey. The congregation were wrapped up in warm, expensive clothes, fur coats. During the service, a tramp walked in. He was dirty, smelly, unshaven and looked very much out of place. He walked up to the front row, making a bit of a noise, and was politely escorted out by the wardens. To everyone's consternation, he then re-entered the church and revealed himself to be their vicar! He had deliberately disguised himself to see the reaction and to bring home the Christmas message. I should think that was a sermon they never forgot!

God still comes to us in humility – in ways and forms we don't expect. Do we recognise him in the face of the cashier who serves us at Sainsburys? The old person sitting on a seat in Main Square, Camberley, wanting a chat? How do we respond to people he puts in our lives, to those around us? To each other?

Lets look more closely at this passage in John 13.: *"Having loved his own who were in the world , he now showed them the full extent of his love"*. Or, as another translation puts it, *"he loved them right through to the end, to the uttermost"*.

Just listen to that again. *"he loved them right through to the end, to the uttermost"*. "He loves **us** right through to the end, the uttermost".

Do we believe that? Because knowing that we're loved to those depths, unconditionally, with all our faults and failings, to the very end, is the key to loving others as Jesus shows us in this model of service. As we allow ourselves to be soaked in the unending, unconditional love of God, to be filled with it, so we're given the ability to love and serve others. This is what this whole sermon series on 1 Cor. 13 is all about. Being filled with this amazing love of God that can go out and change the world. Not through human strength, ability or power, not

through pride in our cleverness, wealth or achievements but through humble, sacrificial love that recognises the image of God in all people and seeks to serve them.

I wonder how you would have reacted if you'd been one of those disciples. Your revered teacher kneels down, removes your dusty sandals and washes your feet, caked with dust and dirt from the streets. I don't know if you've ever been to a Maundy Thursday service where they do foot washing. I must confess I haven't but part of me feels I'd be very embarrassed and part of me feels it could be a profound experience. The disciples were used to having their feet washed – but by servants, not their Master. This must have been a major embarrassment to them!

Typically it's impulsive Peter who speaks out – you can almost hear the shock in his voice: "Lord, are **you** going to wash my feet?" Or, if it was Bruce Almighty "You've got this all wrong, God. What do you think you're doing?"

Jesus bears with him: "You don't realise now what I'm doing but later you will understand" Perhaps a message there for us when God doesn't seem to be behaving as we'd expect him! How does Peter respond? "No way, Lord!" (Sorry – going back into Hollywood mode) - "No! You shall never wash my feet!"

Then look at Jesus' reply . "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me". It's not just physical washing that Peter needs but spiritual. "*No-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he's born of water and the spirit*", as Jesus said earlier in the gospel. In other words, a spiritual rebirth, a spiritual cleansing. And if we're to continue as followers of Jesus, we need continual cleansing. We need to allow Jesus to wash us. Not just when we say the Confession on Sunday mornings but every day. Allow him to show us where we've picked up the dust and dirt from that day, and to wash it away from us.

So we've seen the model that Jesus shows us. The Divine Humility that comes to this world to serve and not to be served. But what about us? What does humility mean to us? Is it putting yourself down, having a low opinion of yourself? Some people tend to think of it like that. But that's actually a false humility. When we look at Jesus as our model, we see that that wasn't the kind of humility he modelled. He knew who he was and why he'd come. And that's the basis on which we all need to start.

Do we know who we are in Christ? Do we know that we are called to serve him in the world? Each one of us? We are loved unconditionally, we're adopted as God's children and co-heirs, co-workers, despite our faults and failings. We have character flaws, we mess up at times, we let God and others down, just as the first disciples did. But we're also gifted in different ways, each one of us is unique with a unique purpose from God. That's not boasting or being proud. It's recognising that all we have comes from God and we offer it back in grateful service.. So, on that basis, how do we live this out practically? Rick Warren, whose book "Building Relationships" we're following through Lent, identifies 4 main areas to think about.

### **1 .Practice giving preference to others:**

One very real, practical way to do this is to cultivate the art of listening. People have a desperate need to be really listened to – really heard. It's one of the greatest services we can give another person. When someone opens up and starts to share, we so often jump in with our own thoughts, views or experiences and we often miss what that person's really trying to tell us. It takes time and discipline and doesn't come naturally to most of us. But it can be learned. If you've ever experienced being listened to in that way you'll know how life giving and affirming it is. We're not talking about all of us becoming counsellors but just making opportunities to give time and space to someone over a cup of coffee maybe. That's just one but immensely powerful and important area we can all work on.

### **2.Practice learning from others:**

Can we take advice or criticism? None of us like it. Criticism can either be constructive or hurtful but are we able to be open and teachable and ask "What can I learn from this"? (Rather than going round to the person's house and punching them on the nose!) It's a great character test to see how we react under criticism. We can defend ourselves, lash out, or retire and lick our wounds. But true humility takes courage. Can we actually go to someone we know and trust and ask them to show us our character flaws, or pinpoint an area that's wrong in our lives? As Rick Warren says: "Humility isn't for wimps".

### **3. Practice admitting when I'm wrong:**

Again it takes courage and humility to admit we've made a mistake. We often tell our children to say sorry when they hit another child or take their toy away but I wonder how often we model it to them, or to those around us – saying sorry when we've lashed out, or neglected our closest relationships. How often do we say sorry to each other here in church? All families fall out at times, and as a church family it's inevitable that we will have disagreements or hurt each other. Do we make the effort to put it right with other people or do we allow resentment and hurt to fester? If this happens it'll affect not just those immediately concerned but the whole church and we'll not grow as God wants us to. Heb.12:15 says "*See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many*". Very serious words. Are there any bitter roots in this congregation? Is there something you or I need to do to put something right?

### **4. Practice surrendering our plans to God:**

What are your goals in life? What do you want to see happening in this church? They may all be worthwhile plans, you may have prayed, assuming they must be God's plans but what happens when they don't seem to be working out? There may be all sorts of reasons – perhaps God's timing isn't ours, perhaps other things need to happen first or God needs to change us first but the point is whose plans are they? Ours or God's? The two aren't always the same. Have we truly surrendered everything we are, our plans, dreams and hopes, our deepest longings to God? Or are we dictating to him, are we getting in his way by trying to make things happen?

The activists among us won't like this but perhaps we need to let go of our plans and desires and stop. We may think we know what this church needs and build our plans accordingly to help God get on with it. But if our plans are not bearing fruit, if we're struggling and stressed, maybe we need to stop and go back to God and say "OK God. My plan hasn't worked. What do you want to do?"

So, to summarise, true humility comes as we look at Jesus' life, and the model he showed us. It comes as we recognise how deeply and unconditionally we're loved. We can't earn that love, it's nothing to do with our work for God, our achievements. He loves us as we are, with all our gifts, abilities and all our flaws. From that starting point, we offer all that we are back to God for him to use us to love and serve others. If you've been convicted by any of those areas we've talked about, don't feel guilty and condemned. God convicts us but doesn't condemn us. Go to him, say sorry to him and to others if you need to, but then accept his forgiveness. He wants to set us free to become more the people he intends us to be. He's given us his Spirit to empower us to live for him, and he's given us each other.

This series is all about real, practical, hard, nitty gritty love, not a nice, sentimental feeling. As Peter says in his letter: "*Above all love one another deeply, for love covers over a multitude of sins*". With the grace of God, by the power of His Spirit may we start to grow more deeply in that love.