

Sermon on Sunday 31 August 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Openhearted, openhanded and barefooted

‘If there’s one thing I’m better at than anyone else, it’s humility.’

There’s a running joke within my family that I have a reputation for bigging myself up by name-dropping certain things into conversations; like which art college I went to, or which celebrities I’ve met. Safe to say, you can always rely on family to keep you humble!

Humility, they say, is a virtue. But that’s not always self-evident in a culture that seems to value dominance, competition and self-promotion. We live in a world that rewards ‘strongmen’ for their ability to trample on others in their thirst for status and significance.

The pursuit of status and significance are, of course, nothing new. Jesus encountered it at this dinner party we hear about today, where entitled guests are seen jockeying for the best seats. And, in typical response, Jesus tells one of his teaching stories; a parable about a wedding reception where someone automatically assumes a place of honour at the top table, but then gets demoted to the cheap seats because a more esteemed guest turns up. Instead, Jesus’ advice is to take the cheap seat first, and then maybe the host will promote you, thus gaining kudos among the other guests.

It’s an odd story, I think, which at first glance seems to be promoting false humility; an insincere display of modesty in order to gain attention or praise. He ends with

the words: 'Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' In other words, humility is valued by God and humility prevents humiliation.

Often in life, it's the hard knocks and humblings that teach us most about humility.

But what is true humility? There's a clue in what Jesus goes on to say. When having a dinner, he says to the host, invite those who can't repay you. So, there's something here about doing something good without the need for payback, praise or recognition.

That's not to say that those things are wrong, but if that's our goal then we're buying into the wrong things in order to feel significant.

There's a guy on social media who gives random strangers bunches of flowers. And each time, you can see the, 'What's the catch?' look on these stranger's faces, until they realise that there is, in fact, no catch; just an act of random kindness. And then there's usually this moment when a smile breaks across their face, occasionally followed by a comment like, 'You have no idea what this means to me today'.

Now, the fact that it's posted on social media, the biggest boasting platform there is, does, I admit, throw up one or two questions, but I think the intention is genuinely to bless someone; it's about the giving rather than the giver; it inspires others to do the same. It's a tiny thing that restores some faith in human nature. It's a reminder that small gestures, without strings, matter.

What is humility? I have three thoughts on what it might be, and two on what it's not.

Humility is not about being a doormat, allowing people to walk all over you. Jesus himself talked about nonviolent resistance when people tried to do just that. One example, surprisingly perhaps, is when someone slaps you on the cheek, he says, 'Turn the other one'. You see, in that culture, only the right hand would be used because the left is reserved for toilet duties. So, if someone slaps you, it's with the back of their hand and it's about domination and inequality. But if you turn the other cheek, you are forcing them to punch you like an equal.

The second thing is that humility isn't the opposite of pride. There is a healthy pride that acknowledges the good in us. The opposite of humility is arrogance.

Three things I believe about humility; it's openhearted, openhanded and barefooted.

Openhearted is the humility that chooses to keep our hearts open and soft towards others and towards God. An open heart chooses to say, 'I can learn from you,' even if I profoundly dislike or disagree with you. This is especially important for religious people who can too easily believe that we hold the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. To be openhearted is to choose not to harden ourselves when we feel attacked or humiliated; to choose instead to ask ourselves questions like, 'What lies behind these actions?', 'What did I learn from this?' and, 'What boundaries might I need to set to safeguard myself?'

Openhanded is the humility to hold things lightly; to surrender our need to be right or to be seen or to be in control; to let go of resentment and choose to be the first to reach out our hand to another. Humility sets us free from the need for revenge or justification. Humility allows God to be God. 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross the cling.' We can only come to God empty and openhanded; no bribes, no resume, no thing to prove.

Openhearted, openhanded and barefooted.

To be barefooted is the humility that knows to take off our shoes before stepping onto someone else's holy ground; to treat each and every person with the respect and dignity they deserve. It's only when we are barefooted that we can try on the shoes of others. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.'

Openhearted, openhanded, barefooted.

We have very few role models in humility, but truly humble people are very attractive. It's the insecure who dominate and humiliate. Humble people have nothing to prove or protect, so they can lift up and affirm. Humble people are secure in the knowledge that they matter and that they are loved.

Significance, in God's eyes, is not measured by any status we can achieve. It is measured by how openhearted, how openhanded and how barefooted we are. And Jesus, of course, is our example; this Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever; this Jesus whose open heart lifted the broken and downtrodden; this Jesus who once walked in the shoes of the poor and washed their feet; this Jesus who today reaches out an empty, scarred hand and says, 'Follow me'.



Luke 14

14 One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched

⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸ “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Hebrews

13 Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

⁴ Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

“Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.”^[a]

⁶ So we say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?”^[b]

⁷ Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.