

Let's be honest. Some of the worst behaviour you will ever have encountered has happened in a church setting. Not necessarily in the service itself, though that's not impossible. But afterwards, or in a meeting or a group, or in a conversation. People can be rotten to each other, or resentful or careerist or plain bitchy. And lest you think that I'm getting at you from the vantage point of clerical perfection, let me say that it's in gatherings of clergy that I've seen the most profound examples of all of these.

People of course are people. Putting us in a church doesn't transform us overnight, and we are all prone to jealousy, envy, ambition, resentment, anger, pride and downright malice on occasions. Spend more than 10 minutes with me in a car and you'll see what I mean. Translate that into being a member of an organisation, then add into the mix the complex emotions and aspirations which come with religious faith, and add a sprinkling of spirituality, and you'll understand that a church is a tinderbox ready to explode with all that is bad about human beings. It's amazing that we're not all wrestling each other to the ground as I speak.

Let's be honest. Some of the best behaviour you will ever have encountered has happened in a church setting. Almost certainly in worship. And also in what happens afterwards, in groups and meetings. People can overflow with the love of God, and demonstrate that in a gentle word, in a thoughtful action, in giving way when it would be more tempting to stand their ground, in planning sacrificial acts of service. Just because we are selfish and wilful doesn't prevent God from redeeming and healing and transforming us. Just because the church is an organisation with all the temptations of power and position doesn't stop God from shaping us so that those temptations don't grind us down. The fact that we are not all wrestling each other to the ground as we speak is because God takes us as we are and does some renewing and reshaping, if we'll allow it.

The essential thing, I guess, is knowing what we are like, and what we need to do to be holy, rather than full of holes. Jesus did. When challenged about the company he kept he turned to the people who thought they were righteous and showed them that it was those who knew their need, their weakness and brokenness who were in a position to be healed. Indeed, they would be first in the queue for the Kingdom. Ezekiel speaks to a people who are facing destruction and points out that they are blaming God (or their parents) rather than looking to themselves. 'Why has God let this happen?' they cry, doing what human beings do and saying it is someone else's fault. Ezekiel turns the question back on them: 'well what have you done which falls short of what God wants? And why are you not confessing it?'

Paul is realistic about human failings, and writes to most of the churches about the basics of human behaviour. It is as clear as it can be in Philippians 2. He begs them to behave. 'Make me joyful', he says. 'Please have the same mind. Agree. Don't be selfish, or inflated, or self important, whatever your role or position. Don't be conceited, as if it was all about you'. Why do you think he goes on about it so much? Because the church in Philippi, just like the church here, is full of people with mixed motives and open to the temptations which life together brings. Wanting to be holy, they are also full of holes.

What brings me hope here is that Paul unleashes the most fabulous theology, the most rapturous flights of Christian vision, the most poetic formulations of the grace of God right out of the boring, grubby, day to day messy set of relationships and processes which characterise this and most other organisations. I don't know whether they had had a particularly contentious church meeting, or whether there was a dispute between people who wanted power and influence. Paul, in this familiar situation, lifts their eyes to something which will transform their relationships and their actions.

'Learn from Jesus Christ', he says. If anyone had the right to be treated with awe and respect and honour it was the second person of the Trinity when he took flesh. Humanity should have been awestruck and full of worship, as if George Clooney or the Queen had walked in. But Jesus did not claim this. He became a servant, and demonstrated it not just in washing feet, but in being stripped and used and handed over and killed. It was that sacrifice which revealed his true greatness. Therefore says Paul, because of all that, God raised him to the highest place. We bow the knee to Christ not because of the power and place and privilege he already had, but because of the service and sacrifice and selfless love he offered. True glory flows from utter self giving.

When you think about it like that, says Paul, what price your disputes and jostling for position? Christ's example puts everything we are and do into a new perspective. And it's not that we then compete to be the best servant – look how humble I'm being! – so that we can get the best place. The point is that Christ's service was 'to the point of death, even death on a cross'. My Bible leaves a gap there, a pause, for us to contemplate the emptiness and loneliness and lostness of that moment. The example of Jesus Christ is that he gives for the sake of giving, not for his own sake. Out of that self giving for our sake comes the true glory. It will be that attitude, that 'mind', which Paul says should characterise your relationships and actions and speaking and listening.

The ordinariness of our day to day life is the canvas on which the greatest theology and the most heroic sacrificial discipleship is lived out. In coffee after church, in the kitchen and the meeting room, on social media and by text, in the conversations after committees, in the speculation and plotting about church structures, in the letters to the press and comments on blogs, in our routines as well as when we are on show...in all of this we have the opportunity to be holy rather than full of holes, to look for the good of others and for the flourishing of the church, to demonstrate that we have the mind of Christ and that we are not just the golf club or the preservation society with an icing of religion.

'Therefore', says Paul, in all of this work out what it means to be saved, and do it with 'fear and trembling'. 'What do you think?' asks Jesus. 'Will you just say you are going to do something, or will you actually do it?' Ezekiel begs his hearers to 'get yourself a new heart and a new spirit'. Thanks be to God that in striving to be holy we are not on our own. Paul ends his stunning vision of the self giving of Christ with this phrase which is full of hope and possibility: 'it is God who is at work within you, enabling you both to will and work for his good pleasure'. May we allow God to do just that. Starting now. And continuing over coffee. Amen.