

Sermon for Fifth after Trinity, 2021

Exodus 34:4-9. Romans 12:9-21. Psalm 101:1-6.
Luke 6:36-42.

The Collect: Grant us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do anything that is good without thee may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Exodus 34:8 ‘And Moses made haste to bow his head toward the earth, and worshipped.’

The First Minister of Scotland paid a visit to Her Majesty the Queen last week, at Holyrood Palace. It was noticeable that Ms Sturgeon did not pay the Queen the traditional respect of a bow or curtsy. Fortunately, neither did she attempt to give her a ‘Glasgow kiss’! The protocol within the Royal Family is even for junior family members to bow or curtsy to the Queen on first meeting her in a morning, or in formal situations. Megan thought that was just for show, and didn’t expect Harry or herself to bow the knee to Harry’s Granny. Americans, who are not subjects of the Crown, don’t bow to anyone (apparently). When Prince George becomes King, his mother, Kate should bow to him, even if she had become Queen Consort. Perhaps protocol will have slackened by then? In our own Church Tradition, the custom is to genuflect to the Bishop, and kiss the episcopal ring when seeing him for the first time in a day, and in specified liturgical actions. This shows respect for his rôle as successor to the Apostles. We bow to the Office not the Office-holder. Pope Francis caused not a little consternation when he rapidly pulled his hand away from several pilgrims who attempted to kiss his hand when being presented to him. Kissing the hand of a priest is similarly to acknowledge that a priest’s hands have been anointed with Holy Chrism at their ordination; his hands handle the Holy Sacraments and distribute them to others.

Clearly, there are two groups of people: those who love ceremony and traditional actions (such as those alluded to above), and those who don’t. Symbolic actions can provoke emotional re-actions. One of the most visible holy actions of the Mass is the elevation of the Host and the Blood of Christ when consecrated. A short ring of the sacrist bell draws attention to this action. This is further emphasised when the sacred Host and Blood is presented face to face with the congregation using the invitation to ‘Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.’ A fitting response would be to make the sign of the cross and to bow deeply. This acknowledges the Royal Presence of our Saviour in our midst. Not to make any responsive gesture is, of itself, a statement; as was Ms Sturgeon’s failure to acknowledge the Queen’s superiority. It says, I am equal to you.

However, Exodus 34:8 reads: ‘Moses made haste to bow his head toward the earth, and worshipped.’ Why? Because the Lord had descended in a cloud and stood with him atop Mount Sinai early in the morning. Moses had returned there after being confronted by the wanton apostasy of the Children of Israel at the bottom of the mountain. You will remember that Moses had been absent from them whilst receiving the first tablets of stone containing the Torah. He had descended to find them worshipping a golden calf; and he smashed the tablets in anger. No doubt greatly disappointed, and not a little contrite, he ascended to seek God’s forgiveness for himself and for them. In Exodus 34:9 Moses says: ‘If I have found favour in thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray

thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance.’

There are many in our world who are stiff-necked. They do not believe that they need to seek God’s favour. According to the Gospel, people are not merciful, as our Father is merciful. There are people who judge and condemn; they forgive only in short measure and without generosity, if at all. There are those who are blind but presume to guide others. There are those who think they know better than their teacher. There are those who act as though they have a clearer perspective than someone else. Are any of these likely to keep their neck and knees stiff when they are ushered into the presence of Almighty God? Are they entitled to claim equality with their God?

There are several Hebrew words for worship. The one here in Exodus 34:8 is most likely (IMHO) to indicate a loud somewhat uninhibited shout of praise (though it can be simply: ‘prostrated). What could have given rise to it was that, in spite of the people’s apostasy, and Moses’ temper, the Lord had proclaimed His properties of mercy, graciousness, forbearance, patience, and steadfast love (though this was not a licence to the guilty to carry on sinning, as that would have lasting consequences for their offspring). In the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, the word for worship here is *proskunesen*, which indicates kissing the hand of a superior (usually involving bending the knee in obeisance). It’s the usual word for worship in the New Testament. Bending the knee, as we have seen in the adoption of the posture at football matches and other public spectacles, carries powerful significance, and woe betide those who refuse it or object to doing this.

So, brothers and sisters, being allowed into the presence of God should be an humbling experience. But it resonates with joy. It should not invoke stiff-necked or stiff-kneed insolence or effrontery. The attitude: ‘Who does this god think he is? I am of equal status!’ shows how badly wrong we can be in our estimation of our own importance. Arrogance in the presence of real majesty reflects the brokenness of human self-image. How should we approach our Saviour? Perhaps the example of the Roman Centurion in Matthew 8:8 gives us some insight into the right attitude when meeting the One who comes to heal and forgive. We recall his words in the Mass when we see the Sacred Body and Blood before our open eyes: ‘Lord, I am not worthy that thou should’st come under my roof, but only say the words and my soul shall be healed.’

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.