



The Humility of a Human and Divine Partnership

Rev'd Canon Dr Eleanor Sanderson, 24th December 2016

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:14

John 1:14

This is a holy night - a silent night, a night into which the Word of God was spoken and then... it was not quite so silent, as light and life and love came forth. From this profoundly beautiful and poetic opening of John's Gospel we can learn that God is before and beyond all language. Thomas Keating puts it like this;

“Think of God in a very big way. And if you do, that's too small! You can't think of anything more wonderful than this God. And you can't figure out anything about God without a special grace...God is so marvellously good, there is no word for it...whatever you say is far less than it is.”

God is before and beyond language. The Word, logos, is the possibility of language, it isn't language itself; it is that which exists before language which enables language and all creativity to be possible. That depth of meaning is lost a little in translation. When we hear 'the word' in English, we can immediately think of a specific word, but that is too far down the process of language creation that logos references. It is the God that is before and beyond all things

that then chose in humility to become specific to creation as well as being the source of creation. Because, as Thomas Keating reminds us, God is bigger than we can think, the incarnation process of God be-coming, coming to be with us in language and in body, is an act of deeply loving humility on behalf of God.

The path of the incarnation is a path of beautiful humility. The humility of God becoming Emmanuel, which means God with us. And when we trace the story of Emmanuel, the story of how in Jesus Christ, God comes to be one with us in our humanity, we find a constant posture of partnership extended and invited between God and humanity. Not only is the whole concept of such a partnership deeply humbling. The specific nature of these partnerships are also so profoundly marked by humility in and of themselves. A baby. A back stable in an army occupied land. Poor people forced to migrate, even if they are heavily pregnant and have only poor and humble means of transport.

Humility marks not just the beginning, but so deeply the end of Jesus' earthly life too. To die a criminal's death after riding into a political and religious battlefield on a donkey, which is a sign of weakness and not kingly strength. So this young baby grows to be a man whose death as well as his life is one long testament to the humility of the heavens. During his life, the Word of God, will also come to speak many words of life into the souls and hearts of others, "blessed are the poor and blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs", words which are very similar to ones that his mother sang out over him when he was yet unborn, "lord God, you will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts and you will lift up the humble and fill the hungry with good things". These are the words of partnership between humanity and God and they are forged and found in humility.

This year I have thought about partnership a lot. I have been reflecting on what it means to partner with each other in response to the call for God's kingdom to come on earth as it does in heaven. These have been thoughts that have shaped much of my life of past research and writing, working cross-culturally within communities navigating such challenges of partnership in the work of international community development. Here, close to home, partnership was understood to be a gospel principle that enlivened the Treaty of Waitangi and as a consequence formed the re-founding of the constitution of our Anglican Church in Te Pouhere a three Tikanga partnership. The Body of Christ is a community of unity consisting of incredible difference and for us to enliven partnership we must first be alive to the grace of humility, because all partnership depends on humility. Mata, the kuia at Parihaka spoke powerfully about partnership to our Anglican schools pilgrims this year. Treaty partnership for her, she said, meant pakeha exerting as much effort to live in Te Aou Maori as she exerts living in a pakeha culture. Her very precise and challenging summary echoes so much of the expressions of cultivating community in cross-cultural development work that I have been part of in Asia, the Pacific and in Africa. I bear testimony to the work and priority of extending ourselves into the cultures, the realities, the lives of others, in order to partner together for a better kingdom on earth as there is in heaven.

I want to share with you tonight, this night when gifts are secretly given, the greatest gift that I have received from God this year. In a particularly personal moment, when I was deeply praying around this sense of partnership in our church; across gender, across culture, across the wonderful difference of our creative diversity...I

felt God speak into my consciousness and drop a question that re-framed with great clarity what it means to walk with Jesus.

“Having understood this need for human partnerships and the mutual work that they require. Will you do the same with me? Will you exert as much energy and intention to lean into my Divinity as I have done to lean into your humanity, so that we can truly partner together?”

It is a powerful question. It is a powerful invitation! “Will you exert as much energy and intention to lean into my Divinity and I have done to lean into your humanity?” “Will you fully enter into partnership with me?” And whilst that question came to me at a specific time in a specific place in relation to specific things. It is the question that is universal, a question to us all. It is the question that has shaped the gift of Emmanuel, and of all those who accept the invitation to follow in the footsteps of our God who is with us.

That is a path that only the truly humble can tread.

Let me describe what it might look like when we find that path: We may begin with silence. A wordless poverty in the presence of God. Then we may find simple and humble words. Words like, “yes”, words like “I’m sorry”, words like “thank you”. Then those words might get longer and more complex, more expressive until glorias, anthems of praise, deep confessions of the heart, wisdom words tumbling out of loving the Lord with all the strength of the heart, mind and soul... and then we may find ourselves in silent nights, in places beyond language, in holy silences where bathed in humility afresh we breathe “yes”, we breathe “amen”, we breathe “thank you”, we breathe “sorry”, we breathe the breath of God in a hong of grace - where the life in me greets the life in you. God leans that

close to us, to exchange breath, to offer us a partnership *for* life and a partnership *of* true life.

It is funny how in finding the littleness of ourselves, we find the bigness of God and how in finding the littleness that God graciously becomes, we find the bigness that we ourselves are invited to become: to return to Thomas Keating's words (this time in full):

Think of God in a very big way. And if you do, that's too small. You can't think of anything more wonderful than this God. And you can't figure out anything about God without a special grace...God is so marvellously good, there is no word for it. So gentle, So kind. So tender so everything marvellous. That is God. And whatever you say is far less than it is. As Paul says 'It hasn't crossed the imagination of any human being what God has prepared for those who love him'

And in the adapted words of a carol we have sung tonight;

All poor men and women who are humble,
All you lame ones who stumble
Come haste ye and be not afraid
For Jesus, our treasure,
With love past all measure
In a lowly poor manger was laid

Then haste we to show him
The praises we owe him
Our service he ne'er can despise
Whose love still is able
To show and lead us to that stable
Where softly in the manger the logos of God and possibility of all life lies.