

Stott week 7. Dependence

As we begin the 2nd week in advent, we near the end of our studies in John Stott's book *The Radical Disciple* – chapter 7 is headed 'dependence'.

In this chapter, John Stott gives some very personal and moving accounts of when he had to rely on others. They are well worth reading – I'm not going to repeat them here, but instead focus on the issues he raises. Though I'll begin with a personal confession – reading this chapter really spoke to me – one thing I really struggle with is asking others for help and also feeling vulnerable – probably because I don't want them to say 'no' and so feeling rejected – but that's something for my counselling sessions!

Since the middle of the 20th century, there has been the tendency on self-reliance and so to dispense with God, though the phrase self-reliance dates back to a book written by American philosopher Ralf Waldo Emerson – he focused on how humans are to 'trust themselves;' and to free themselves from the constraints of conformity and to seek solitude, viewing community as a distraction to self improvement.

Let's see how these ideas are profoundly unchristian –we are, as we saw last week in our thinking about balance, best when we are in fellowship with each other and relationship with Christ. Let's look a little deeper into how we are dependence and on who?

The truth, as we have seen and will see in our Old Testament readings from Isaiah is that we are all sinners who are dependent on God for his mercy and for his continued grace. To attempt to live without him is the actual definition of sin. And we also need one another.

Anyone who's been incapacitated or ill knows how important others giving help is, however embarrassing we might feel – this is where, from time to time, dependent on God and others, we need to be. As we reflect on depending on others and the experience that brings, we find that God can use these experiences to bring greater maturity. Linked to all this, as anyone who has been in pain knows, is the emotional weakness that comes to the surface at such times and might find its expression in tears. For some of us, we might have been brought up with the idea of a stiff upper lip, and that shows of emotion are signs of weakness. We're nearly in the carol season, and I always wonder why, in the Carol *Away in a manger*, William Kirkpatrick found it necessary to write 'but little lord Jesus no crying he made', something which is clearly not the case. When we read the gospels we find that Jesus is recorded as having wept twice – once over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) – how much that is needed at the moment! And again at the graveside of Lazarus his friend (John 11:35).

So if Jesus wept, his disciples – you and me, are given permission to do so too... But why do we sometimes shed tears – I was at the opera last week – I cried and I laughed during Donizetti's comic but sad opera about love – first unrequited, but then all ends well. There is, of course, the danger when things are not as we want, wallowing in self-pity, or times of regret. Sometimes tears flow as a result of emotional crisis or looking back on trauma or abuse. Cry, seek help, don't' bottle it up!

I want, for a few minutes to focus back on something closely linked with dependence, and that's humility – and its darker side humiliation. Stott comments on Archbishop Michael Ramsey's talks being given to those about to be ordained. These points are well worth taking on board and I commend them as good practice especially during this season of Advent – with its call to repent, to turn back to God.

- 1) **Thank God** often and always. Thank God carefully and wonderingly for your continuing privileges... Thankfulness is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.
- 2) Take care about the **confession of your sins**. Be sure to criticise yourself in God's presence. This is your self-examination. Put yourself under the divine criticism: that is your confession...

- 3) Be ready to accept **humiliations**. They can hurt terribly, but they can help you to be humble. There can be the trivial humiliations. Accept them. There can be the bigger humiliations.... All these can be so many chances to be a little nearer to our humble and crucified Lord...
- 4) Do not worry about **status**. There is only one status that our Lord bids us to be concerned with, and that is the status of our proximity to himself...
- 5) Use your **Sense of humour**. Laugh about things, laugh about the absurdities of life, laugh about yourself, and about your own absurdity. We are all of us infinitesimally small and ludicrous creatures within God's universe. You have to be serious, but never solemn, because if you are solemn about anything, there is the risk of becoming solemn about yourself.

A refusal to be dependent on others is not a mark of maturity but immaturity. I wonder if you've ever seen the film/play *Driving Miss Daisy*? Although there is an undercurrent of racial tension, the main plot is the developing psychological relationship between the two main characters, Miss Daisy, a stubborn 72 year old widow and her African American driver Hoke. The film begins with Miss Daisy crashing her car and her son saying she will need help due to her advancing age. In the beginning she will have nothing to do with her new chauffeur. On one occasion she cries out 'I don't need you, I don't want you, I don't like you'. But gradually as they spend time together, they grow to appreciate each other until later she says to him 'you're my best friend, Really' and takes his hand.

Spoiler alert -the film ends with her in a nursing home, and her son and chauffeur Hoke come to visit her – and helps her to the end.

The film documents well the slow transformation of their relationship – ageing is a process which changed things – by the end Hoke is 85 and Miss Daisy 97.

Still today our relationships are subject to change. We are blessed with two Anna Chaplains, and the Anna Chaplain's vision is to see relationships flourish in old age – Paul Tournier, in his book 'learning to grow old' said 'we are called to become more personal, to become persons, to face old age with all our personal resources. Our society has become one where we give things priority over people, and over relationships. Old people are discounted because they no longer have economic value. Yet, when we are old...we have the time and the qualifications necessary to a true ministry of personal relationships.

In a few weeks time, the other side of Christmas – we will read the stories of old Simeon and Anna, and how they ministered to Jesus in their old age.

Yes, there are times and seasons when we grow through spending time alone with God and the struggle between independence and dependence – and maybe the key is interdependence – is one of life's steepest learning curves.

Jesus himself taught that dependence grows as we grown. After his resurrection he said to Peter – '(John 21:18) – when you were young you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go'

John tells us that Jesus' words had a specific reference to Peter and his death, but they resonate well with the lived experience of many here today.

So, while independence might be our experience, for the radical disciple, learning dependence is the most characteristic attitude. Our lives come full circle.

We begin them totally dependent on the love, care and protection of others. We go through a stage of life where there may be others dependent on us. And most of us will go out of this world totally dependent on the love and care of others. In this we might have something to learn from other cultures where this is family, rather than strangers. But I wonder if this dependence is not of itself one of weaknesses of growing old, but part of the design, the model which God gifts to us.

We all might know someone who has said (or even have said ourselves) 'I don't want to be a burden to anyone else. The truth is we are designed to be a burden to others. You are designed to be a burden to me, and I am designed to be a burden to you. And the life of the family, including that of the local church family, should be one of 'mutual burdensomeness' - that's why I rejoice in our pastoral team – and others of our church community who care and share burdens. This is no surprise for us as bible believing Christians – St Paul write in Gal 6:2 'carry each other's burdens, and this way you will fulfil the law of Christ'. And Jesus himself said (matt 11:30) my burden is light.

We are only 2 weeks away from Christmas Eve (eek!). Christ himself takes on the dignity of dependence. He is born a baby, totally dependent on the care of Mary, his mother. He needed to be fed, to have his bottom wiped, to be propped up when he rolled over. And yet he never loses his dignity. And at the end at the cross, he again becomes totally dependent, limbs pierced and stretched, unable to move. So, I invite you again to look at the person of our Lord Jesus Christ - in him we learn that dependence does not, cannot, deprive a person of their dignity, of their supreme worth. And if dependence was appropriate for the God of the universe, it's appropriate for me and you too.

Prayer