

Humility

Yesterday I attended a memorial service in York Minster for the late Lord Habgood. He is fondly remembered for his time as Archbishop of York and some of his achievements in the wider Church have perhaps been underestimated or forgotten. Yesterday's service was a good opportunity to be reminded of what he did and was.

Although this was not exactly spelt out it was clear that despite his high standing, great intellect and wisdom he was clearly at heart a humble man. In the way he treated people, often seen only by the individuals concerned, he displayed both compassion and humility.

On Monday the Church commemorated the birth of John the Baptist. Although humility does not immediately come to mind when we think of John the Baptist he was the first to acknowledge and proclaim the priority of Jesus, as we heard in our Bible reading just now (Luke 3.25-16). That was in itself an act of humility.

A few weeks ago we thought about Jean Vanier, the founder of the l'Arche communities in which disabled and non-disabled people live together. He too was an eminent man, a theologian and philosopher, and yet at the same time an extremely humble man.

I am currently reading one of his more recent books, "Life's Great Questions", in which he has this to say about humility: "Humility is like abandonment because it is about letting go of one's self – one's ego, one's personal projects and one's ambitions – for something bigger, something beyond individual control or scope" (p. 92). He then cites John the Baptist's words: "He must grow greater and I must grow less" (John 3.30).

Humility involves putting God and other people first. It involves being selfless, following the dictates not of one's own wishes and desires but those of love, openness and service. Throughout the book Jean Vanier stresses the need to break down barriers.

Jean Vanier so clearly lived that out in his own life of service to others. But do we see that on the political stage in our own country and further afield? Is it cynical or realistic to say that humility is more often noted for its absence? Is the motivation for actions in the public sphere more often driven by ambition or by the wish to please?

For humility does not mean silence. It does not mean not speaking out and standing up for what we believe to be right. Far from it. In that respect John the Baptist shows that this is not at all incompatible with humility. Both are ingredients for peace and reconciliation. As Jean Vanier goes on to say: "Humility is living with abandonment to the movement of life, to the movement of peace" (p. 93).