

“Learning To Kneel”

(Matthew 2.1-12)

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The Purpose of the Kings

The wise men travel from the East, clear in their purpose. They come seeking the newborn king... They tell Herod, “*we have come to pay him homage.*”

To pay homage – a word we rarely use now – is to recognise the authority of another... to show respect and deference to one who is ‘above’ you... to one who has a legitimate call on your life... one to whom you owe allegiance. It is to honour another... and in this case it’s synonymous with *worship*.

On finding the baby they kneel – these princes of men – they kneel down in the straw and worship the Christ-child... for his authority must be acknowledged.

Learning to Kneel

Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz in 1943, left behind a journal ¹ recording her unconventional religious conversion and spiritual journey. She *chose* to go to the death camps as an act of faith-inspired solidarity with her people... when she could have been granted an exemption.

She had been in many ways the prototype of the modern woman. Thoroughly secular, (having discarded her Jewish faith)... an independent woman who smoked, drank, questioned conventionality and spoke comfortably of her sexual experience with no thought of marriage or children; a young assertive, self-controlled and intelligent woman of great vitality. But in 1941 in occupied Holland.... as she begins her journal at age 27, she feels

¹ *Etty: A Diary 1941-3*

something religious stirring within her ²... and she describes what she is about to write as *“the story of a girl who gradually learned to kneel.”*

Her metaphor for the journey to faith is *‘learning to kneel’*. She describes the embarrassment she feels in even speaking of it, and indeed how she’d find it far easier to describe the intimacies of her love-making than this... and yet in the encounter with what she very gingerly describes as *‘God’*, (barely able to squeeze the word through her teeth), she *must* fall down to her knees.

“Last night, shortly before going to bed, I suddenly went down on my knees... Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself... I was embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words...”

Self Worship

We are part of a proud culture that says, *‘I refuse to kneel to anyone!’* When you track the word *homage* itself, you see how it has markedly declined in the last 200 hundred years, steadily dropping all through the 20th century until now we use it very rarely at all... for there are no relationships that we require it for.³ For we place great store in self-autonomy and self-authority – *‘I will make my own choices and live my own way – I owe no allegiance to any one or any thing... I kneel to no one!’* As a society we’re proud of this, seeing something noble and good in this conviction.

But slowly – without ever making the connection – we are becoming aware of a problem seeping into our society, capable of doing great harm. We give it many names... arrogance, selfishness, narcissism, obsession with self... egos that are out of control. And we find that politically and socially, we’ve lost the capacity to make sacrificial choices for the common good... because the only one *we’ll* serve... is our self. *‘I refuse to kneel to anyone’* is another way of saying, the only one I’ll worship is myself!

² Primarily through the influence of an older male lover.

³ Our primary use now is as a metaphor at artistic or sporting awards nights.

“You Gotta Serve Somebody”

In 1979, when Bob Dylan was full-steam in his publicly assertive Christian era, he released a ‘hit’ called *“You Gotta Serve Somebody”*. As a 23 year old I was dismissive... *‘Great song, but shame about the uber-conservative embarrassing lyrics!’* But now... 38 years later... I get it! Here’s one verse (typical of the rest) followed by the repetitive chorus...

*“You may be a construction worker working on a home
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome
You might own guns and you might even own tanks
You might be somebody’s landlord, you might even own banks*

*But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are
You’re gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”*

I don’t want to buy into that juxtaposition of the devil and the Lord – part of that born-again religion he was into at the time – but Dylan *is* right. For all our hubris, our assertion of total autonomy... we do always end up kneeling before some thing or some one.

At this time of the year it’s not hard to see how much consumerism – shopping – rules the lives of many people. That’s a ‘master’ many end up serving without ever recognising it! But consumerism is really only one expression of ego – it is the self we’re feeding when we shop and consume. And obsession with self takes many forms... *‘I refuse to kneel to anyone’* is another way of saying, the only one I’ll worship is myself!

Learning to Kneel (2)

In that somewhat superior way we Christians often have, we might be comfortable in saying that our society needs to learn how to kneel again... to kneel in worship before the Lord. But I imagine it’s less comfortable to hear me say... *‘We as a church need to learn to kneel again.’* And I’m not talking about the body stance we adopt in public worship, but wanting to push much deeper than that...

I could talk about our arrogance and autonomy in matters of faith. I remember with humorous embarrassment my hubris as a young priest... where if I couldn’t understand a

doctrine, then it had to be nonsense. I went for years refusing to say the Creed because *I* (note the heavy emphasis) didn't agree with it. It was an act of unrestrained ego – me thinking that I had already mastered the mystery of Christ. (Ephesians 3. 2,9) There was no way a *clever young man* like me, was going to kneel before 2,000 years of faithful reflection in the tradition of the church... Hubris! Ego!

But I'm actually more worried about how we see our practice of faith, particularly how we pray. In a previous parish, I lamented in a sermon one morning that the parishioners never told me about how *they* prayed. We could talk football, wine, fetes or gutters, but never prayer. Two brave people responded... and I was shocked by what they described. Both of them followed a similar pattern. It began with a problem *they* were concerned about, then after a quick '*God please help me*', they worried about it with a churning mind... until what appeared as a solution came. This they assumed was God's answer. Now, I'm sure God was present... but only as a patient spectator. At no point in their process of prayer was homage paid to God... at no point was the Lord's authority recognised... and the divine voice was never given space to speak.

Unless we kneel before God, leaving our fear-driven ego in the straw, there is no prayer. I'm talking about the disposition of head and heart, not the body posture we assume. But as a church that needs to learn to kneel again, it probably *would* be a good simple practice, if we literally bowed ourselves in deep reverence to God, at least once a day.

This is the way true freedom comes. The other self-obsessed stuff is pure illusion! As Bob Dylan said, '*Don't kid yourself with this autonomy pride... You will end up serving some one, so choose carefully who and what it is!*'