

SERMON: 29 May 2016 (Rev Dr Brenda Robson)**Readings: Psalm 131; Philippians 2: 1–11**

I watched a lovely programme about a week ago – looking at the beauty of the north-west corner of Scotland, narrated by Ewan McGregor – up around Lochinver and Achiltibuie and Cape Wrath, the bird colony on Handa. Beautiful scenery, amazing wildlife – birds, otters, hares, dolphins and lots of deer.

I was especially interested because I have just spent a few days at Lochinver and deer are certainly plentiful.

There was one scene in the programme where a little male deer, just a few days old – approached a huge stag, one with massive antlers that was the alpha male – and the little thing jumped around the stag, heading butting it and charging at it, standing back and charging again! On the whole the stag ignored it, occasionally it gently pushed the little deer aside with its antlers but it was a proud and arrogant little thing, full of its own importance, and it didn't give up easily.

I was reading Psalm 131 and I thought of the picture of that little deer.

It is one of the shortest Psalms, a Psalm of David

David presents a beautiful picture of the kind of peace and quiet that God wants us to experience in him. – I have stilled and quietened my soul.

David speaks in this Psalm about pride. He was often a humble man but as with us, humility did not always come easily. He was all too aware of his sinful nature and was troubled when he did things his way instead of God's way.

He wrote in Psalm 51 – when he had lusted after Bathsheba and committed adultery with her – verse 3 **“For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.**

David here is agitated and overwrought, no sense of the still and quiet soul.

He cries out to God **“Create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (verse 10)**

He concludes **“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.” (verse 17)**

In Psalm 131 we find David in a different mood – He has that contrite heart and humility – the pride has been subdued, the soul is quiet and still under God's mighty but protective and forgiving hand.

David describes this quiet state as being like a weaned child. Why a weaned child?

Why not a nursing child? Surely that would be a better and more beautiful picture, the closeness between the mother and her nursing baby, warm, secure, comfortable, safe, the mother providing nourishment, the relationship one of trust.

I think David is making a different point here, a point that would be understood better by people of his day. In the east children were weaned at around the age of 3 years or even later, not during the first year as in our culture.

The three year old child is more developed and more challenging. He has a wider range of vocabulary and behaviour. Weaning at this age is more traumatic for the child and probably for the mother. The child would be angry, complaining, demanding, attempting to nurse and being pushed away by the one who had previously been totally available to him.

The recently weaned child has experienced deprivation and disappointment and confusion and rage and even grief – and such a child has quieted his soul and is sitting peacefully by his mother, harmony restored, no longer demanding but accepting, submitted to the mother's will.

The reasons he has been denied are still too great for him to understand but he has endured the struggle and dried his tears and is finally willing to trust his mother's wisdom and to enjoy the peace that comes with this humility.

So David uses this picture of the weaned child to illustrate his hope in God.

David is no longer concerning himself with great matters beyond his understanding. He does not know why he has had to endure disappointments and trials and confusion and persecution – but now he sits in peace beside his divine parent, with a contrite heart and humbled, willing to trust that God knows what is best for him.

The Bible – Old and New Testament – is full of references to the proud heart and the negative consequences of pride.

The book of Proverbs is full of verses about pride.

We all know Proverbs 16:18 – Pride comes before a fall

We also read –

When pride comes then comes disgrace but with humility comes wisdom (11:2)

In pride there is no room for God (Psalm 10:4). You see, in pride we put our human nature first. We like to accept Jesus as our Saviour but is Jesus accepted as the Lord of our life? There is a difference. If Jesus is Lord then we will live our lives fully and seamlessly under his authority, humbly giving control of our lives to him.

Now there is nothing wrong in feeling proud about an achievement in itself, we can look at something we have achieved or improved or completed and feel proud of that achievement – we are doing better now than last month or last year and we can be proud of that. We have put a lot of effort into something and feel proud of the result.

I attended the BB display night last Friday – proud parents and proud leaders and proud boys - all the badges and trophies and medals – the little ones in Anchor boys seeing what the older boys have achieved - President's Badges and Queens Badges.

Pride in such achievements is good.

What God does not want is for us to compare ourselves to others and feel superior. That is the wrong kind of pride, that it sinful pride.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians says "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself without comparing himself to somebody else" 6 : 3 and 4

Those who are proud and feel superior to others become boastful and even bullying.

They raise their eyes in judgement of others

It can be easier to grumble than to be humble.

Alpha male and alpha female behaviour comes to the fore, scoring points, having the last word, one-upmanship – or one-upwomanship!

The desire to be right outweighs grace and peace. Pride and grace do not belong together. Where there is humility and gentleness of spirit, there is grace.

In pride there is no room for God.

The tongue becomes a weapon, putting other people down, complaining, undermining.

James speaks about the taming of the tongue and how difficult that is.

The tongue is a small part of the body but it makes great boasts (3:5)

The chapter goes on to say -

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With our tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse men and women who have been made in God's likeness (3:7 - 9).

There is great wisdom in the Scottish phrase "Will ye haud yer tongue!"

Paul wrote to the Philippians **"Let your gentleness be evident to all."** (4:5)

Sadly, the Church is not always a place where gentleness and humility abound. In this world where there is much strife and hostility, the Church needs to be different, to be a fountain of grace and peace and humility, evident to all. That is our responsibility, our calling.

For years people have worn badges and bracelets with the letters WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? In any situation, we also need to think WWJS – What would Jesus Say?

Jesus was superior to everyone he met in every way – he was the God/Man. Such was his wisdom that he could win any argument. He frequently out-did the Pharisees and those who were proud and arrogant – he called them hypocrites and a den of vipers amongst other things. He often did not spare them.

But he raised up the humble and the meek. He spoke to them words of encouragement and forgiveness and hope. He could speak firmly and he spoke out against their immoral and sinful behaviour but he spoke in love.

James says **"God gives us more grace. That is why scripture says God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble."** (4:6) and he goes on to say **"Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up"**. (4:10)

David said in Psalm 37 **"the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace"** (verse 11)

Jesus himself echoed these words in the Sermon on the Mount when he said **"Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth."** (Matthew 5:5)

In our second reading this morning from Philippians 2, Paul reminds us to adopt the same attitudes as Jesus when he says **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be that of Christ Jesus."**

Jesus who humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.

Jesus who came as the servant king to wash dirty feet and touch dirty flesh and wipe away tears and raise up the humble.

Jesus, you laid aside your majesty
Gave up everything for us

How much do we long to be still in the presence of this Jesus and to quieten our souls? I return to the picture I started with, that proud little deer frantically running around and charging at the mighty stag, head butting it and getting nowhere. The little deer symbolizing our pride and futile behaviour and misguided actions. The stag symbolizing God, powerful and gentle, patient and forgiving, tolerant and loving.

Jesus wants us to stop fretting over the things we cannot understand, to accept that there will always be unanswered questions in this life, we do not see the bigger picture that God sees. Jesus wants us to come to him and be still and quiet, to trust and to be at peace.

In the words of a Noel Richards song –

To be in your presence
To sit at your feet
Where your love surrounds me
And makes me complete

This is my desire O Lord
This is my desire

To rest in your presence
Not rushing away
To cherish each moment
Here I would stay

This is my desire O Lord
This is my desire

AMEN