

Hard To Be Humble

Luke 14:1-14

4th Sunday after Epiphany

30th January 2011

So Wayne Gretzky turned 50 this week. Hard to believe that the Great One could be that old. In my mind, he is still just the boy I remember him as in the 1970s when we first came to Canada and he was just beginning to make a name for himself in the NHL.

I have always been impressed with Wayne Gretzky not just for his achievements on the ice as player or manager but, more so, for the person that he is. His unassuming, unpretentious nature stands out in the world of professional sports where so many so-called stars constantly feel the need to blow their own horns and tell everyone how good they are.

Writing about Gretzky's 50th on the CBC website this week, Scott Morrison remarked on his modesty. "As great as The Great One was and in different ways still is," said Morrison, "he was just like the rest of us in the sense that, no matter his stardom and greatness, his feet never really got too far from the ground. Oh, he could mingle and party with the glitterati, but he'd also never forget the trainer's birthday, or have an autographed stick ready for a visiting coach's kid, or ask a scribe how things were health wise on the home front. And he still never forgets a name.

Morrison went on to say that, "Gretzky's humility is no better represented than [when he once told me that his] 'last game in New York was my greatest day in hockey. Everything you enjoy about the sport of hockey as a kid, driving to practice with mom and dad, driving to the game with mom and dad, looking in the stands and seeing your mom and dad and your friends, that all come together in that last game in New York. It just brought back sort of all the memories I had as a kid playing hockey...I knew then there was no difference between playing as an eight-year-old and going to a game and being a professional hockey player at 38 and playing your last game. The feeling was still the same, the excitement was still the same, the relationship with your family was the same, the game itself was the same...'"¹

Morrison commented that it would have been so easy for Gretzky to have singled out any one of his great hockey moments – such as the amazing second game in the 1987 Canada Cup final, a 6-5 win over the Soviets, or scoring a hat-trick to lead the Los Angeles Kings past the Toronto Maple Leafs in the Western Conference final in 1993. But, no, his most treasured moment was his memory of all that he had shared with his parents and he paid tribute to all they had done to help make him the player he had become. What great humility!

Wayne Gretzky is a role model, of course, not just for aspiring hockey players but for all of us. And this because, so often, we are engaged in the very opposite

behaviour. Looking after Number One. Protecting our fragile ego. Working hard at self-promotion. Rather than letting other people tell us what their estimate is of us, we feel we have to make a pre-emptive strike and sound out loudly how great we are, how much we are achieving and how talented we are. If only we could emulate Wayne Gretzky's modesty.

If we are honest, though, humility does not come easily. Our human nature being so flawed, it's constantly tempting to think of ourselves more highly than we should. As Mac Davis says in his famous song, "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, when I'm perfect in every way, I can't wait to look in the mirror, 'Cos I get better looking each day."²

It's difficult to be humble because we live in a world today where humility is no longer a cherished value. It is seen, rather, as a failing, a weakness. The way of the world today is to be assertive. To put yourself first. To get your fair share. To make sure nobody tramples over you. To protect your rights. So it's hard to be humble in a world like this. In a world where the values of contemporary society conflict so directly with those of our faith.

It's also so difficult to be humble these days because we are, paradoxically, so tempted to be proud of our humility. Not only do we adopt the holier-than-thou attitude towards others but we even believe sometimes that we are humbler-than-thou.

Walking into the empty sanctuary of his church one day, a minister was suddenly possessed by a wave of mystical rapture, and threw himself onto the ground before the cross on the communion table, proclaiming, "Lord, I'm Nothing!" At that very moment, the church organist came through the door and, seeing the minister in such a state, felt profoundly moved by similar emotions. So he too, threw himself down before the cross, "Lord, I'm Nothing!"

Then, way in the back of the sanctuary where he had been quietly working away, the custodian was equally overcome and also threw himself to the ground, shouting, "Lord, 'I'm Nothing.'" Whereupon, the minister turned to the organist and whispered, "Look who thinks he's Nothing!"³ Ah, yes, we love to be humbler-than-thou, don't we?

In today's world, humility does not come easily or naturally, yet it is exactly what Jesus demands of us. And this is very evident in the passage we read today from Luke's Gospel about the wedding feast. Cutting across all contemporary protocols of hospitality, the Man from Nazareth ventures a new way of doing things. When you are invited to a wedding feast, he says, don't sit in the

best place. Sit in the lowest. Don't sit in the place of honour, beside those-and-such-as-those. Sit farthest away from these people. Not only that. Don't invite the people who expect to be invited. Invite those who least expect to be invited. The marginalised and dispossessed of society. The poor. The lame. The hungry. The people who can't pay you back.⁴

Of course, just like the disciples of old, we balk at injunctions that are so contrary to our human nature. We shrink from having to act in ways that go against the grain. Nonetheless, we can't help but hear Jesus' message. From his lips directly to our hearts: If we would be true followers, we must embrace the way of humility.

In terms of our lives today, it means that we must adopt the selflessness that refuses to be on a "glory kick", only doing those things where we can gain praise and popularity. Rather, the humility to which we are called is "disinterested charity" where we do things, give of ourselves – our time, talents and treasure – without looking for anything in return. Where we serve the poor and the needy, bringing them to the table of plenty as equals, with no thought of payback. Where we inject goodness into the world around us, without any thought that it will be noticed or rewarded.

Humility, too, is remembering whence we have come and what we owe to God.

A man carried a large safety pin in his pocket. Frequently, he would bring it out, run his fingers over it, then put it away again. Someone once asked him about it and he replied that it was a constant reminder of how God had helped him. As a young man, he had run away from home, got in with the wrong crowd, lived a life of crime, finally ending up on the streets in poverty and degradation, and, on cold winters' nights, wearing a threadbare overcoat held together by a safety pin.

One night he walked into an inner-city mission to keep warm. There he had been greatly influenced by one of the workers who brought him to know Jesus Christ. As a result of this religious experience, he was motivated to get his life back on track and had then become very successful in business. Long afterwards, the feel of that pin engendered a deep humility within as he remembered how greatly God had helped him at the lowest point of his life – and how much he owed to him.⁵

Humility, of course, is not an optional extra for the Christian. Not something we practice if we feel like it. Rather, it is a basic essential because it is the way to the Kingdom. It is the *sine qua non* for entry to the higher places. A necessity for admittance to the nearer presence of Christ.

When Charlemagne, the great Christian ruler of the Middle Ages, died, the funeral procession left his castle for the nearby cathedral. As the royal casket arrived, with a lot of pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop, who barred the cathedral door. "Who comes?" the Bishop asked, as was the custom. "Charlemagne,

Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire," proclaimed the Emperor's proud herald. "Him I know not," the Bishop replied. "Who comes?" The herald, a bit shaken, replied, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth." "Him I know not," the Bishop said again. "Who comes?" The herald, now completely crushed, responded, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ." To which the Bishop, Christ's representative, responded, "Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"⁶

Yes, it may be hard to be humble these days. But it's the way of Christ. It's the way to the kingdom. It's the way to that eternal feast where one day we will hear God welcoming us with the words we so long to hear. "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord."⁷

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¹ Scott Morrison, "Gretzky's 50th", CBCSports, January 26, 2011, www.cbcsports.ca

² Mac Davis, "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble", www.minibite.com/oldies/humble.htm

³ Max Reif, Hall of Famous Jokes, <http://www.realnothings.com/famous%20jokes/nothingjoke.htm>

⁴ Luke 14: 7-14

⁵ Carveth Mitchell, "The Man Who Came To Dinner", *A Sign In The Subway*, CSS Publishing, www.ChristianGlobe.com

⁶ Alex Gondola, "Table Manners", *Come As You Are*, CSS Publishing, 2000, www.ChristianGlobe.com

⁷ Matthew 25:23