

Unworthy & Inadequate

For many people, being *unworthy* is another way of suggesting that they are in fact *inadequate*. We all know what it is like to be asked to do something, or even be asked to be something, and to feel that we are not up to it; we lack what it takes.

Of course, knowing our limitations is often both good and wise. I have recently done a course on very basic Hindi for travel; I would be a fool to accept an invitation to give a sermon in Hindi. It would be beyond me.

There are, of course two extremes in this. First of all, there is the person who has a very high sense of their own worth - they just think that they are the most important person around; they believe that they have the right to be treated differently.

(It's interesting how, so often, such people come to be, often through very little 'effort' of their own, put in such a position. Sometimes they have inherited wealth from their hard-working ancestors; sometimes they are created by the media.)

Whatever the reasons, a lack of basic humility is never a way to win true popularity - and most people have a good feeling when the arrogant fall from grace. Arrogance is not a positive thing. A comic example of this is found in the television series *The Big Bang Theory*, in the person of Dr Sheldon Cooper. Utterly convinced of his own superiority over others, he fails to notice his own inability to act as a normal person. (One has to say that Dr Cooper is, in fact, superior to nearly everyone else, certainly intellectually; the trouble is, he likes to show it!)

At the other end is false humility. Most people know of the character in the novel '*David Copperfield*' by Charles Dickens, Uriah Heep - known for his lack of worthiness or, as someone put it, "notable for his cloying humility, obsequiousness, and insincerity, making frequent references to his own "humbleness" Uriah Heep is not a likeable character; indeed he is the villain (eventually, by the way, being transported to Australia for his crimes). One of the reasons for his unlikeableness is his cloying humility and his ever present desire to tell people how unworthy he is. All of us know that his humility is false, and is merely a way to grab attention.

Some people, like the character Uriah Heep know that their humility is false; they put it on deliberately, hoping to be admired for it. Some people, though, really do feel unworthy of just about anything - or, probably more likely, inadequate. They are unable to see anything positive about themselves and, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, are unable to offer anything because they think that they have nothing to offer.

One would hope that none of us reach either of these extremes, but we might well know people who do. But while we may not be at the extremes, the middle ground is a bit more common - the real feeling that we do not have the ability to do things. Sometimes they might be true: if I were asked to run a marathon today I would probably have to decline on the grounds of inability. But if I am asked to run one in a couple of years, with the chance of good training, refusal might be more difficult, especially if the person who asked was a successful trainer of overweight,

elderly couch-potatoes! At some stage I have to ask myself whether I *can't* do something or whether *I just don't want to* - for whatever reasons.

Christians have an added problem in all of this, and that problem is God. What do I do when God asks me to do something? One quick answer would be to 'do a Jonah': God tells Jonah to go to the city of Niniveh; Jonah does not want to and runs away. The difficulty with this, as Jonah found out, is that it's not really possible to run away from God - He will find you.

Think about this one in your own life. Have you ever tried to ignore God, hoping that He might go away, yet have found that He will not stop persisting? How did that feel? What did you eventually do about it?

A more common reaction, I suspect, to God's call is to calmly and logically convince ourselves that it is false; God is not really asking me to do that; I am mistaken. In this way of acting, it's interesting how often God fits in with my wants; how He wants me to just stay in the comfortable place that I am in or that I would like to be in.

The Prayer of the Comfortable

Oh Lord, Master of all Creation, Master of my life. I come before you as your humble servant, waiting to serve and to do your will. I thank you, Lord, that you have called me to this life of complete service; that you ask no more of me than to turn up to church on Sunday's (when it doesn't interfere with any other event that I think you might send my way). I thank you, Lord, that you do not ask me to actually do anything, because you know that I wouldn't be very good at it anyway, and other people would do it a lot better and, anyway, somebody has to just come and do a bit of praying and attend worship. Not an easy job, but one that I am willing to give up my time and energy to do, Lord, for you.

Help me, Lord, to ignore those crazy, nagging voices I sometimes hear, pretending to be you. I know that you wouldn't want me to do anything. Shield me, O Lord, from the false view that the scriptures might apply to me.

Above all, Lord, help me to keep talking when I pray, as I know that you want to hear my praise, adoration and problems, rather than talk to me. Amen.

We have to guard against this. Of course, it's easier *not* to guard against it, but that is not really the way of the disciple. We have to learn to discern God's will for us and then learn to accept that His will be done - that His will *can* be done!

In scripture there are a few notable examples of the seemingly inadequate or unworthy being called. A few are well worth considering.

- Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:9-22 & Genesis 18:9-15)
- Gideon (Judges 6:11-24): As this story begins, Gideon is beating grain in an underground pit, hiding from the Midianites - hardly the "man of valour" referred to be the angel!
- Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10)
- Isaiah (Is 6:1-10)

- Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

Read each of these. What is the reason the people involved give for not wanting to do what God wants? How does God reply?

What comes across in each of these is that God does not deny what is *seen by the people as a disability*. He just does not see them as a problem. Basically, God seems to be saying that are able to do anything that He asks us to do!

Fear of Failure

This is a major issue for all of us - and not just for individuals but for churches as well. To *do something* is to risk; to do something unknown or difficult is to risk a lot! Some might feel that to fail in something is a sign that they don't have enough faith, that they have in some way failed God. *Because failure is a reality*. Even the best trained athlete, the best football team, knows about failure: it is not nice, but it is there. When a church attempts something and fails, so often the recriminations begin; the need to fix blame; the desire never to do it again!

But our view of failure might not be God's. Our view can often be that a lack of instant success is failure. We want to see results. But the scriptures teach us otherwise. God's salvation plan takes thousands of years, and still continues. Abraham is promised that he will be the father of an uncountable people, but will not live to see it. Moses leads the people to the Promised Land, over forty years, but he does not live to enter it! We are told to sow; in His time God does the rest. Failure to us is not failure to God. (Standing at the foot of the cross on Good Friday might well have raised a few questions about God's success rate!)

How often do we as a church bemoan how we are not growing? New initiatives are put into place to grow our numbers, and they do not work. So, let's look around for a new scheme. Our success as Christians will be judged by the amount of people in church on Sunday! (Sometimes we are so busy desperately trying to grow church that we forget to *be church*.)

The important thing seems to be *doing what God wants, even if we cannot see a satisfactory result*. We have to assume, in faith, that God knows what He is doing. We also have to remember that it is not for us to decide what can and cannot be risked for the Kingdom of God.

Read the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). What might this tell us about taking risks as opposed to being safe? Does God want us to risk ourselves?

Think back to the first session: God has created us to be able to do all that He wants us to do. If we say that we cannot, for whatever reason, what are we saying about God?

Say together the Magnificat, the Song of Mary - the song of the Inadequate chosen by God!

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed;
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name.*

*He has mercy on those who fear him,
from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm
and has scattered the proud in their conceit,*

*Casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
to remember his promise of mercy,*

*The promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

Luke 1.46-55