

Sunday 11th January 2009

'If I am a Christian I must be weak and emotionally dependent'

Matthew 19 13-15 and 2 Corinthians 12 7 - 10

[Camera] Last week Stephen started our series on the image problems of Christianity by suggesting that being Christian didn't mean that we had to be sad and boring. In fact he suggested that to be so is a complete misreading of what it is to be a Christian. Sad and boring Christians are not following the exciting and transforming pattern for their lives and for others which Jesus modelled to us. This week I am talking about whether Christians are inevitably weak and emotionally dependent! I could take the high risk approach and just stand here as living proof that Christians are not necessarily weak or emotionally dependent but since these sermons are now downloadable from the church's website I don't think that would make good listening (or, indeed, some might say good watching) so here goes . . .

How value laden are those words! Weak and emotionally dependent! How many of us would rejoice to see the word 'weak' written in a school report about themselves or their children - little Johnnie appears weak in his understanding of algebra, French, quantum mechanics or whatever Or who wants to be told by the doctor that a part of their body or capacity is 'weak'? It smacks of under-performance and failure. And then there is 'emotionally dependent'. Imagine yourself at one of those ghastly management training days and you are invited to sum yourself up in three words – who would use two of them up on 'emotionally dependent'? Unless you were looking for a way out of the rat race and an immediate P45? Of course we would be loathed to own up to such a negative image of ourselves.

But do we have to admit that the same might apply if we owned up to being a Christian? Are we worried that the stereotypes that abound will mean that saying we are Christian is tantamount to saying that we are weak and emotionally dependent. I have to confess that there is a chap at my work and although I have never had the conversation with him I wonder if he is a Christian. And why do I wonder that? Well to be honest it is because he doesn't really quite fit in – he is helpful and smiley and efficient. He seems to care. But in my work environment something about him does not quite add up and I find myself wondering if that is because he has faith! It makes me feel ashamed as I say it but it's the truth. Are you guilty of such judgements as well?

Now I am delighted to say for all sorts of reasons, that I have come up with a great example of a Christian who could not be further away from weak and emotionally dependent. Take a look at this. It is Bear Grylls who is a fully committed Christian. [You tube clip]

Don't you agree it puts a whole new slant on the idea of us as Jesus' disciples becoming fishers of men!

To quote an article about Bear Grylls: [Slide 1]

[He] feels strongly that the Christian church often has only itself to blame for its weak image. 'I guess people see it as either something that opinionated weirdos do or that it is just boring' he says. And continues:

'My experience of Christianity was that it was both of the above (ie weird and boring), either people were just odd, all smiley and false or they frowned and seemed to judge me when I went skinny dipping.

It took me so long to find out that real faith is actually the opposite. Faith wasn't about becoming weird or about giving up having fun, it was finding out that I was held, forgiven and loved regardless. [Click on Slide 1 for animated box]

[repeat last sentence]

{Camera] As a lawyer I am tempted just to say – 'I rest my case' and leave it at that. A brave, fierce, strong, daredevil adventurer proves the stereotype is unjustified.

But may be to be more convinced of the inaccuracy of the stereotype of Christians as weak and emotionally dependent we need to understand the basis of the wrong image of Christians. Well I am the first to admit, and indeed already have, that our society and let's be honest we ourselves perpetuate that false image. And one way in which we do this I believe is our depiction of Jesus himself. Do we think of Jesus as Bear Grylls or the most ineffectual but well meaning teacher we can remember from school? We heard the reading earlier where Jesus called the little children to him – aren't we tempted to think that portrays a certain weakness? [Slide 2] After all children are emotionally dependent aren't they – was Jesus just connecting with like minded – feeble humans? Numerous saccharine depictions lead us to think that. But, wait. If we don't think of children as just emotionally dependent and some might add, weak, but instead see them as [Slide 3] loving, loyal, growing, fun, often lacking that paralysing sense of responsibility and so full of potential then perhaps we see a

different Jesus. A Jesus who challenges us to be loyal and loving, to have fun and to fulfil our potential in a bold way with and through him.

And again when we hear the story of how Jesus encouraged people to be his disciples what tone of voice do we hear? [Slide 4] Is it the weak voice of a loser, desperate to win friends asking 'please follow me if it suits you and nothing better comes along or even addressing himself just to little children?'. Instead I like the idea of him as one writer puts it 'barking' at people to "Follow me" as he kept on going, striding out towards his next encounter. [Slide 5] A sort of sergeant major's impatient summons which would never attract the weak and emotionally dependent but instead scare them away! [Camera] We need to challenge our perception of what Jesus was like and ask why over the centuries we have watered down our view of him. I guess it is partly a throw back to notions of Jesus as love which idea got romanctised and thus disempowered Jesus to produce for us a 'pale' imitation of Christ.

But if one of our Bible readings helped us to see the problem, our other reading taken from Paul can point the way ahead. But you may not like it. Any Alpha males among us may switch off entirely. For Paul talks about boasting in how weakness and, we think, also about a physical infirmity is as a delight to him. What sort of language is he talking? Not that of twenty-first century do-it-all keeping-up-appearances macho-man or super-woman! Paul took his problems of weakness to God in prayer asking him to take them away and he got a clear answer. 'No, I am not going to do anything about the problem that is your weakness, because, God says: [Slide 6]

'My grace is enough: it's all you need.
My strength comes into its own in your weakness'. [Camera]

And don't we recognise something of that in our own lives. How easy it is to forget our reliance on God when all things are going swimmingly well, we think, because of who we are or what we have done. Then something terrible happens or maybe not even something terrible but the piling up of monotony or drudgery over something which we have little or no choice or control - being at home with the kids all day or commuting to work every day and we think there has to be something else and so we might turn to God, because that is all we can do, in our weakness and lack of control. It is then that perhaps we allow God in and seek to rely upon his strength. It is a sad reflection on how mixed up is our relationship with God that we need things to go wrong for us before we often turn to God but that is an example of the sin we all have. And it is then that God's strength can come into our lives.

So, are we weak and emotionally dependent? As Christians we can answer it in two ways. The first is to say 'yes' we are both of those things but we do not accept them as negative descriptions of ourselves. We revel and rejoice in admitting the liberating truth that we are weak and emotionally dependent and accepting the relationship with God, our Father, to which that admission can lead us through Jesus Christ.

Or we can don our survival suit – go drink the juice of squeezed elephant dung and climb inside a camel's still-warm skin like Bear Grylls on the Discovery Channel and show that we are brave and daring and emotionally self-sufficient. But just listen again to what he has to say: [Slide 8]

"The bravest men I have known from the climbing world and the SAS had very little to prove and also had a healthy awareness of their fallibility. If I have learned anything from those days it is that I am not as strong as people might think and that I desperately need my faith. When the chips are down it is all I really have and I am no longer afraid to admit that."

[Click on Slide 8 for animated box to appear]

Amen

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