

SIGNPOSTS SERIES – NO 4

THE SHADOW SIDE

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Psalm 139:12-18; Philippians 2:12-13; Matthew 7:1-5

*[Series based upon the book of the same title, by Trevor Hudson]

In our series to date, we've looked at how crucial our image of God is for how we relate to God and how we live our lives. We've also seen how we need to develop "Christian memory" – based upon the Scriptures, upon keeping company with Jesus as revealed in the gospels, and considering how God has been aware of us, loved us and been present in our lives since before we were born! Such knowledge is intended as an aid to greater awareness of God, which led us on to last week's encouragement to consider the Kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed. We briefly considered repentance and belief, two significant aspects of receiving the Kingdom of God. I ended with a quote from Trevor Hudson's book, emphasising learning to trust God; growing in faith is a matter of learning, and none of us has yet 'arrived'.

Today we move to the fourth sermon in our series. As the series develops, I promise not to do the sermon version of the children's song, "There was an old woman who swallowed a fly...", followed by her swallowing a spider to catch the fly, then a whole host of animals, and each time the song repeats the whole lot until eventually she swallowed a horse and the song ends, "perhaps she'll die!" So at Week Ten in the series, I won't attempt a brief linking summary of all previous nine sermons, or perhaps you'll die (of boredom)!

If I were to ask to take your photograph, what would be some of your reactions?

- Yes please, only a few would say
- No thanks, I'm shy / not photogenic, most others would say
- If you had no choice, you'd smile, check your hair / lipstick / wish you hadn't put that funny old shirt on today / and check again that you were smiling
- You might also try to pull your tummy in, move to a spot in front of where the house was just painted or the garden flowers were at their best...

All of these are natural reactions, we all do them to varying degrees, and we are familiar with them in others and ourselves. But I have read that this is a recent phenomenon; did you know that?

For instance, a century ago, people did little of that. You simply had your photo taken – dressed smartly if you were a smart or important person, in an era when photographs weren't taken by everybody everyday using cell phones; but generally your photo was taken just as you found yourself at that moment. Hence old family photos often seem

sombre by today's standards, as do old school class or sports club photos, and formal portrait photographs. People are unsmiling; there is no attempt to "touch up" face or clothing for a photo.

This is said to be a reflection of society then and now. Take a photo even now of a person from a remote tribe who has had limited experience of modern culture, and you'll notice the same; it is not considered necessary to smile for a camera, only to allow the cameraperson to take the shot, reflecting reality, what simply "is" without "touch up"!

We are so used to smiling for photos, sucking our tummy in if we still can, because instinctively we want to present our "best side", especially for a photograph that others will look at.

Where am I leading with all of this? I'm not suggesting we should now all frown for photographs, or at least stop smiling – who doesn't love a great photo of their friends or family having a fun time together? But it illustrates a point that our society places huge emphasis on always presenting only our best self, or what we consider our acceptable self. We are encouraged by almost everyone and everything in modern commercialistic society to show only our best side. Any "less than pretty" aspect, anything to do with our character that we consider less acceptable or unacceptable, must be kept hidden from view, hidden even from knowledge.

We are told – for good reason – to "put our best foot forward" when first meeting people or going for an important interview. Why? Because first impressions count, we want to do good PRO for ourselves or our organisation or cause, and because being human, we all like to be liked, or at least, to be well thought of.

If that is how we are accustomed to behaving, and how society has now programmed us to live, what impact could that have on our spiritual life? Is it appropriate behaviour in relation to God? Do we need to put our best foot forward for God, in the sense of fooling ourselves that somehow we need to make a good impression even to God?

Trevor Hudson, in his chapter entitled "Acknowledging our shadow selves", discusses this tendency to hide parts of ourselves that we do not like, that are considered unacceptable, that may even represent areas of persistent sin in our lives. He does so in ways that are powerful, and which I will not cover in detail today, largely for lack of time to properly present and discuss them without doing them injustice, and also to encourage at least some of you to obtain his book and read it for yourself, as some have already done; one house church group is finding it very useful to follow the series in their weekly meetings.

But here follow some thoughts for our consideration:

One of the great hymns of the church is, "Just as I am... O Lamb of God, I come." But if we constantly feel the need to present only our best sides, perhaps we will carry that on into our relationship with God, wanting to keep hidden (as if we ever could), anything

less than perfect. Hudson reminds us that conversion is not only a once-and-for-all event, it is also an ongoing process, and quotes another person who said, “Conversion is the surrender of as much of myself as I know today, to as much of Christ as I know today”.

He also uses some of the parables of Jesus, suggesting how we could use them imaginatively and prayerfully, to allow the light and love of Christ to shine on any areas of our character and behaviour that we considered less-than-acceptable, instead of burying them.

There is also a powerful word on one of Jesus’ statements, in regard to a common human trait of sometimes criticising or even condemning in others, that which we see in ourselves. Or, perhaps, that which we sometimes refuse to acknowledge within ourselves, trying to repress it (hence use of the term “shadow self”), and in the process coming out in judgement of others. He reminds us of Jesus’ words, from today’s Gospel reading, about wanting to remove the speck in our brother’s eye but not first seeing or dealing with the log in our own eye.

It reminds me of a powerful lesson I learnt about 7 or 8 years ago, in a house church group, when we were following a course based upon a Gospel story, the famous “Prodigal Son”. The course used readings and audiotapes, and was compiled by Henri Nouwen, [I’ve previously seen it in the church library here, and some of you have done it]. It used a famous Rembrandt painting of the scene where the father in the story (representing God our Heavenly Father) welcomes home the returning son (representing all sinners, welcomed by God, and to which I referred last week). [The original of this famous painting is housed in The Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia.]

In parts of the course, one considers one’s reactions to the story, identifying in ways perhaps with the father, in other ways with the son. And in the story as told by Jesus, that seems to be the focus, so all is well and good...

...Until we are also asked to consider the elder brother, the otherwise righteous one who did not welcome the return of the brother, but instead grumbled and thought only of how wrong his brother had been. Jesus included him in the story, for some reason. Most would agree it was related to the way the Pharisees responded to some of the people coming to Jesus, as if to say, “Huh, such sinners, surely THEY can’t belong to God’s kingdom?” So Jesus’ story includes this brother, the self-righteous, judgmental, critical one. He is unable to rejoice with the father that his son returned, and could think only of how wrong the son had been. He is ungracious and unloving, despite having remained faithfully at his father’s side all this time, and thus is out of step with his father.

In this study we were doing, we were asked to consider ways in which we perhaps reacted like that. Although it was uncomfortable, in honesty, every member of our group could identify in some or other way with the attitudes of that brother.

Conclusion:

In previous sermons I used Trevor Hudson’s outline more closely than I have today,

whereas here I have outlined his theme in a completely different way. However, I wish to close with a quotation from early on in his chapter on this topic, which is powerful. And at communion, I wish to use another, the paragraph with which he closes his chapter, as it relates very well to us coming to the communion rail.

“Within conventional Christian circles there is a widespread tendency to acknowledge only the ‘acceptable’ selves. Those considered ‘unacceptable’ are usually either neglected or rejected. This way of denial, as we shall see later, has destructive consequences. Most tragic of all is that large tracts of our inner life are prevented from experiencing God’s transforming friendship. Conversion can only continue as we acknowledge these shadow selves and expose them to the light of God’s love. There, God is able to embrace them with his grace, gather them together... and slowly weave them into the new person that he is making. In this way we collaborate with the Holy One in the continual transformation of our lives. Using the language of Paul the apostle, we being to ‘... work out our salvation with fear and trembling’. (Philippians 2:12) [Hudson page 60]

SERMON ENDS

Quotation for use at Communion:

“We are invited to a home-coming banquet. From the banqueting table the risen Christ, with wounded hands, offers us broken bread and poured-out wine. Tasting these gifts of God’s acceptance we begin to accept ourselves. No part of our personality is excluded from the table. Acknowledging our shadow selves, befriending them with the friendship of Christ and bringing them to the banqueting table continues our conversion. We are upon the Way towards becoming the person God wants us to be.” [Hudson page 69 – slight re-ordering of words, line 2]

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