

Trinity 19 2013

One of the few benefits of getting older is that the embarrassment gene seems to get turned off or at least damped down. Which is just as well, as increasing deafness can make one assume that little asides about the extraordinary clothes the person opposite is wearing cannot be overheard, which is not always true. So as a teenager, when the embarrassment gene was still highly active, travelling with my elderly grandmother was always a source of immense anxiety as she would turn to me and in a loud voice comment on the size or shape of everyone we encountered.

Embarrassment has its place – it stops us offending others, but sometimes it also prevents us from being the best we can be.

One Christmas holiday, as a student, I worked in a factory making parts for Xerox machines . It was the sort of job that is now obsolete – machines rather than people do such tasks. I had to solder lots of tiny diodes and triodes into a circuit board. The flux made my eyes water and because it was December, they played constant Christmas pop songs at full volume. There are only so many times you can listen to ‘all I want for Christmas’ without wanting to scream. The way I found I could cope was by setting myself targets and seeing if I could beat them. So I progressed from doing 30 circuits a day, to 50, and then got up to 80, at which point I got taken aside and told in no uncertain terms that I was letting the side down. They could not understand why I would want to work harder as it produced no more pay. Either I agreed to make no more than 50 a day or there would be trouble.

Embarrassed, not wanting to be ostracised by my fellow workers, I slowed down, joined them for long cigarette breaks in the loo, and had absolutely no problem in reducing my productivity. Now, I am embarrassed that I was cowardly, yet I am ashamed to say, I can think of other examples where in order to fit in, I have adapted my behaviour.

Why don't we do our best? Why should anyone be ashamed to do a job well?

Paul, writing to Timothy, asks him not to be ashamed of the fact that he, Paul, is in prison. He's there because he did what was right. Paul is not embarrassed. He knows that many people will disown him for having a prison record, but when it came to a choice, he decided that he had to choose the right path, the path that followed Christ.

Jesus uses what we might regard as a very non-PC example of how we should behave, citing a slave preparing his master's supper. It should be done, and done well, and at all times, even if it is the middle of the night, simply because that is what you do. It is your duty.

Times have changed. Some of those changes are excellent. Slavery is now not accepted. But some changes are less advantageous to society, for they affect our shared morality. It is arguable now whether there is a shared ideal of morality. We reward dubious business practices, particularly in banking. Perhaps it is inevitable in such a varied society that there is no one ideal, no one image of a good perfect person.

Yet we have a unified view of physical excellence – slim, toned, blemish-free. People spend a fortune on face creams, hair dressers, gym membership, personal trainers. We give time to it, going jogging or booking precious time in our diary for an appointment, foregoing food – sometimes whole days at a time. How much time, money or effort do we give towards becoming more moral people?

We are moral beings, we have a sense of right and wrong, but without a shared ideal and a collective desire for all people to buy into this ideal, it will fail. Children quickly learn to tell fibs. If they are encouraged to think that this is good, a clever way of avoiding trouble or avoiding work, the ideal of truth as a virtue is lost. Each virtue requires effort and reinforcement if it is to be our goal. So honesty, generosity, prudence, diligence, patience, constancy, and indeed all the virtues, need a more than a little help from us in the PR department. Advertising, television, everything conspires to make it seem as though we should never wait for anything, that we can never have enough things. We are told we need a new supply of fossil fuels, the economy needs to grow, we must all buy more. We are encouraged to sue if we have had an accident, always to get as much as we can. To fit in, we go along with this, we are embarrassed to do without, embarrassed to stand up and say 'no, that is not how we want life to be. We have an ideal of the perfect moral being, and we will put time and effort and money into becoming more like that and into helping other people become like this.'

What is our ideal?

Our image of perfection is Christ. If we spend time understanding him, time in prayer, if we use our wealth in helping others, we may not get a washboard stomach, or toned biceps, but we will become more beautiful people. The church is the gym for the soul. And like going to the gym, you only see improvement with practice.

Physical perfection can bring fame and praise. Spiritual perfection will not bring thanks, but then it is only our duty. Physical perfection will not bring peace. Spiritual perfection can bring an inner peace.

Like losing the embarrassment gene, it makes us at ease in our environment, whilst at the same time causing discomfort to those around us.

As St Paul said:

8Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, 9who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.13Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

This is our training programme.

Imagine if everyone was as evangelistic about the teaching of Christ as about the latest diet. Imagine people queuing to hear the word as they did to buy the latest edition of Grand Theft Auto.

To use a marketing term, we have a product that is the most attractive, the most valuable, the most life-changing in the world.

We really do need to let other people into the secret

Amen