

LETTERS TO THE ARMY

December 2007

PASTORAL LETTERS FROM THE OFFICE OF THE GENERAL TO SALVATIONISTS ACROSS THE WORLD

This is the fifth in a series of Pastoral Letters from the General to every Salvationist across the world.

The Pastoral Letters are intended to be distributed unchanged and entire to all Salvationists and may be shared also with others interested in the sacred purposes for which God raised up The Salvation Army.

INTRODUCTION

Greetings in the Name of Jesus Christ.

This comes to all Salvationists with my strong, ongoing affection in Christ for you, and with my prayers for your effectiveness in the sacred calling that God, in his supreme wisdom, has placed upon the peoples known as Salvationists.

It has been laid upon my heart that I am to take a step of obedience under God by reaching out to you all through Pastoral Letters written from time to time. I write therefore in order to obey the One who has created us all, and with a longing that what is written will affirm, encourage and inspire you.

The themes for these occasional Pastoral Letters continue to be the themes God reveals. His holy will is made known in many ways. I pledge myself to be mindful that his will is often revealed through interaction with members of the Body and not only or always in the seclusion of the place of prayer.

It is my deep hope that each Pastoral Letter will be read wherever Salvationists are to be found, whether in private or in public settings. The chosen themes may prompt discussion, prayer and – as appropriate – action.

All Scripture quotations are from the New International version, unless otherwise stated.

Shaw Clifton
General

PASTORAL LETTER FIVE

HUMILITY

Dear Fellow Salvationists,

This fifth Pastoral Letter comes to you from my office at International Headquarters with special greetings in the Lord Jesus Christ for the holy season of Christmas and with my prayers for you as we enter together into a new year.

Humility marks the manner of our Lord's entry into the world as a tiny child and therefore is a natural theme for this Letter. It is good also if we can find grace to allow us each to enter 2008 with a spirit of Christ-like humility. We seek a humility that will govern our interactions with others, that will be the basis of all we plan for the year ahead, and that will spring from our humility toward the One who has given himself for us in dying at Calvary.

Through the prophet, the Lord has said, 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit' (Isaiah 57:15). I need his presence. I need him near, hour by hour. We share that humble need. As I write to you I am conscious of my own need and am identifying with you in my heart just where you are around the world.

Many of you will know that recently I have encountered new problems in my health. My sense of personal need is thus intensified. Grace becomes very, very real when this happens to us. God's people rise up in prayer for us. Their messages encourage and lift us. How grateful I am, with my wife and family, for the countless beautiful messages reaching us every day. All of this brings added humility for sometimes we are rendered simply helpless. Suddenly everything seems stripped away except for the grace of God, shown in the love offered by others. It is very humbling.

So this Letter reaches out to every Salvationist in the world, but especially on this occasion to those in circumstances that are hard and therefore humbling.

The English word, 'humility', comes from the Latin, *humus* meaning 'earth' or 'soil'. It refers to something lowly, something beneath our feet. It thus becomes an antidote to pride. Before Jesus was born, the Romans and Greeks were scornful of humility. It was something found only in slaves and in others of low station in life, so low that they could exercise no influence upon public affairs. Yet Jesus embraced it. Because he did so, humility was transformed from a mark of social degradation to an essential Christian virtue.

In the sixth century St. Benedict taught that to ascend the spiritual ladder is to descend into humility. What a wonderful, life-changing paradox this is. The great Reformer of the sixteenth century, Martin Luther, said that humility is the very foundation and fruit of faith.

In the celebration of the birth of Jesus, will you focus with me on the humility of it all? Read again the words of Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. Our perfect Saviour refused to cling to divine status. He was silent when falsely accused. He was forgiving. I long to be like him. He cared about the poor and washed the feet of others. I long to be like him. He has shown us that true life comes forth from death, that the humble will be exalted, that the first will be last, and that to find your life you must first of all lose it. I long to go deeper and deeper into these truths.

I know that this same longing is shared by fellow Salvationists everywhere. Our hunger will be satisfied: 'Blessed are those who (in humility) hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6). He will teach us as humbly we sit at his feet: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:29).

The secret of a humble heart is to be close to Jesus. We see his perfection to know we are flawed. We see his obedience to know we are rebellious. We see his love to know we are hard of heart. We see his patience to know we are intolerant.

I am asking him in prayer to humble me, whatever it costs. I am asking him in prayer to keep his Army humble, whatever it costs. That cost may be a high one. General Bramwell Booth wrote: 'Do you expect to understand all God's ways with you? Do you want a reason and explanation for every mystery before you can trust him? It is the darkness which makes humble faith a reality. It is the ignorance of the future which proves the committal of the soul.'

I commit you to the perfect love of Christ.

I offer you my lasting gratitude and constant encouragement.

Shaw Clifton
General
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