

The church was large and traditional, the wooden pews old and worn. It was Sunday morning and the church was about half full with people scattered throughout. The third and fourth pews from the back were particularly unstable and rocked as people stood and sat. Two men were at the wall end of these two pews, one on each pew. They were discussing this pew instability as they sat prior to the commencement of the sermon. Their discussion overlapped the transition between the shuffling of feet and the preacher's opening remarks. This was not the first time the preacher had noticed and even heard these men having conversations during church and to have one during his sermon was the last straw for him.

The preacher stopping his opening remarks and addressed the closer of the two men and asked him what he was talking about. The man meekly replied that it was nothing important. Dissatisfied, the preacher moved from his pulpit and proceeded down the aisle to the aisle end of the pew that the man sat on and again asked the man at the other end of the pew what was he talking about. The man sheepishly again replied that it was nothing. Like all conversations they are never about nothing, but about something. This particular conversation was about how someone had fixed a bolt that protruded horizontally from the seat of the pew. This bolt was made on steel, not wood like the rest of the pew and was not part of the original plan. The first man had earlier commented that if it were not for this shaft catching on the other pew as they rocked the whole row would come tumbling down like dominos.

The preacher stood demanding an answer. Noticing the man's hand covering something the preacher demanded to know what was under his hand. Nervously the man moved his hand to reveal the bolt. The preacher saw nothing but turned and addressed the congregation and began rambling on about respect. The preacher then turned to the man and asked him if he though he was behaving respectfully. There was silence as the preacher glared at the man. Victory and respect was in the preacher's hand. The man looked down sorrowfully, unsure as to how to respond to this humiliation and the possibly rhetorical question posed to him.

The man stood to answer. There was a low murmur across the congregation. The preacher looked less certain. The man began to speak. "You asked me about respect and I'm not sure what that means" were his opening remarks. More murmurs were heard. The preacher looks more confident. "Years ago, back in school, children who spoke in class were punished. They learnt to respect their teachers and obey. Or did they? Did they rather learn fear of punishment that taught them to obey? Is fear and respect one and the same? In the bible it says to fear the Lord your God. Shouldn't that be respect the Lord your God?" There was a silent pause as all pondered this question. "I would have thought that we should fear the devil and respect God. Then again maybe we should respect the devil and have no need to fear him because we have God." Another murmur passed over the congregation like a Mexican wave. The preacher stood stonily silent. The man continued. "This fear and respect, God and the devil thing becomes clearer for me if I compare ourselves to sheep, God to the shepherd and the devil to the wolf. We fear the wolf who preys upon us. We respect the wolf's power and when the wolf prowls near us we behave ever so like obedient school children so as to avoid being singled out." Another silent pause swept the congregation who sat and listened transfixed like no other sermon had captured them. Some were turned in their seats and some stood to see the man that was behind their pew, but all eyes were on this man and his eyes were on the preacher. "When we sheep are close to the shepherd we feel safe and secure. We play like school children in the playground. We show no signs of fear. We show little sign of respect for we are like children and God is our loving father."

"Today as I stand here I feel like a child caught out, or a sheep singled out by the wolf. I shall not return but seek the shepherd elsewhere. This is not the first time I have been in a house that says it belongs to the shepherd only to find it is the house of the wolf. I have been in many such houses and have met many fine sheep but to my regret have also met many wolves. Perhaps there are none of the shepherd's houses remaining and they are all overrun by wolves in sheep's clothing. Perhaps I will abandon my search and live in solitude."

The man moved from where he had stood, shuffled past the others in the pew, past the preacher, out the side door and into the sunlight.

A dream - 22 July 2001 6:30pm