

What does being just, being kind and being humble look like?

Imagine two siblings and a difficult old mother who is now in a care home. One sibling is living just around the corner from her; the other is some distance away. The nearby sibling is visiting almost every day, doing bits of shopping, and listening to their mother's worries and grumbles. The distant sibling announces a visit next week. Then, the day before they are due to arrive they suddenly announce they are not coming as they have to go abroad for work. As an attempt to try and make up for this, the distant sibling sends huge bunches of flowers and boxes of chocolates for both their mum and their sibling. How will the exasperated caring sibling and the disappointed mother react when these arrive? Will the gifts do any good, make amends?

The sibling who is nearby and caring for their mother possibly feels the keenness of injustice. It feels unfair that they are burdened by such a weight of responsibility and the distant sibling doesn't take their fair share. The mother doesn't like being a burden on the nearer sibling.

In addition to this, both mother and the nearby sibling want to be shown some kindness, upfront and personal, by a visit. The token of sending flowers and chocolates seems superficial and not a truthful loving kindness. The reality is that both mother and the other sibling need a visit and an acknowledgement of their struggle.

Finally, both would like to feel that failings have been acknowledged by the absent sibling, that they now have a deepening awareness of the situation and agree that they have fallen short of what was needed. If the distant sibling could show a bit of humility rather than an over-the-top gesture, what a difference that might make.

These days we don't offer placatory gifts of fruit and flowers and livestock to our God as the people of the ancient world did. But how often are we guilty, like the sibling living at a distance, of using customary gestures, the flowers adorning the front of the church, the well-chosen hymns, the good quality coffee afterwards, to hide from our lack of attention to the things God really wants – a determined quest for justice in society, real kindness to our fellow worshippers and the wider community and a recognition – through humility – that we can never do enough. In our relationship with God, can we avoid the mistake of the distant sibling who gave a grand gesture but not the justice, kindness and humility that was required? God calls us to walk alongside and, like the mother, wants presence, not presents!