

31st Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's Gospel ends with the words: 'If you exalt yourself you will be humbled; if you humble yourself you will be exalted'(Matthew 23:12). What might Jesus mean by this? There are a lot of wrong ideas about humility around, so I thought we might take some time to try to come to a better appreciation of this most attractive of virtues: the gentle humility that is so characteristic of the one who said: 'Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart'(Matthew 11:29).

One way of entering into this subject is to start where Jesus starts: with the ways in which we human beings are inclined to get puffed up ideas about ourselves. We fail to appreciate who we really are and try to emulate others or pretend to them and to ourselves that we are other than our real selves. The advertising media is a clear proof that our culture is sold on the importance of appearance and image rather than on truth.

One form of pride is pride based on externals like beauty, wealth, status, honours, or reputation. Self-adulation and vanity based on such things is quite foolish as most people see through it, and any adulation they may offer is likely to be a pretence. Though widespread and dangerous, this kind of vanity is also rather silly and pathetic.

A more dangerous form of pride is that associated with power. Such pride can lead to a refusal to submit to appropriate authority, an exaggerated self-confidence, a false sense of independence and at times a dominating ambition that over-rides others. Common life-experiences (ultimately the break-down of health and the process of dying) usually expose the error in self-sufficiency and the folly of self-complacency. Saint Paul reminds us: 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?'(1Corinthians 4:7). Everything we are and everything we have is gift, so what on earth are we doing abusing our power to put others down and exalt ourselves? Jesus puts it very simply: 'Without me you can do nothing'(John 15:5; see Philippians 2:13).

Even worse is intellectual pride: the pride of refusing to accept or trust anything that fails to make sense to one's own over-rated intellect. Such a failure to recognise the limits of reason itself and of one's own reason in particular is an indication of a profound blindness and stupidity, but such is the power of the ego that we can fall victim to such folly without recognising it. An important safeguard against this kind of pride is to form the habit of checking our opinion against that of others, and of seeking advice and not making the mistake of thinking we always know best.

The worst form of pride and the most difficult to ferret out and to overcome is pride in what a person considers to be his or her 'spiritual achievements'. Thanks to the wonderful gifts God has given us through our family and our education and the opportunities that have come our way, and especially the people who have loved us, our lives have been enriched in so many ways. God's grace gives us a certain refinement and attraction and deepens our capacity to give and receive love. If you would care to recall some very special moments of grace you will remember that you received them with humility and gratitude. When the moment of grace passed its effects remained and we found ourselves immensely enriched. A Carmelite priest, Father Marie-Eugène, reminds us that it is then that temptation comes. He writes: 'Temptation comes, subtle and unawares. It comes almost necessarily, so tenacious is pride. The soul uses these spiritual

riches to exalt self and to attract notice, to serve a need for affection or for domination, or simply to make its personal ideas triumph. One's personality, idolatrous of itself, is substituted for God; and what is received to be used as an instrument and a means, it uses to impose itself' (I want to see God, page 399).

We are all too familiar with the crass and subtle ways in which our ego seeks to flatter itself. It is the virtue of humility that rescues us from pride or protects us from succumbing to it.

So what is humility? A good way to understand it is to reflect on today's Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 131): 'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed my soul [The Greek version reads: 'I think humbly of myself' – tapeinophroneô] and have quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore'.

To picture humility, we are to look at a two-year old - vulnerable, needy, dependent, but cuddled up against its mother's breast, knowing that everything is okay because of the mother's love. The child knows, however unconsciously, that it is not self-reliant. It needs its mother - but she is there and so there is no need for fear. This is humility. It fits beautifully with the following scene from the Gospels: 'The disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, Whoever lowers himself [tapeinow] like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matthew 18:1-5). The last remark makes it clear that Jesus identifies with the child. He is among them, showing them how to rely on the God he called 'Abba', 'my Father'. Disciples are to share this absolute and total trust, for being in the kingdom of heaven means accepting God as a loving Father.

Humility involves the realisation that all we are and have is a gift; that we are dependent upon God for everything; that of ourselves we can do nothing. It includes a response to this awareness that is characterised by joy, because we are confident, like a child, that we are not alone, but are embraced by a God who loves us unconditionally and in whom we can have absolute trust. With this trust there is no need to inflate our ego by taking pride in external possessions, or anything as passing and fickle as physical beauty or reputation. There is no need to dominate over others or think we are superior to them. There is no need to think we have to know everything or to measure everything by our poor, limited intellect, and we avoid like the plague the awful sin of taking glory in the spiritual gifts with which God has graced us.

As Jesus says in today's Gospel: 'You have only one Master' - for it is God who is the source of everything we are and have. And he is our Father who loves us. 'You have only one Teacher', Jesus himself who invites each of us: 'Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29).

I leave you with words from a young woman who learned this lesson so well. Her name is Therese Martin. We know her as Saint Therese of Lisieux. In the story of her soul she sees Jesus as the Sun who is the source of all her nourishment and warmth, and she exclaims: 'O my only Love, I am happy to feel myself so small, so frail in your sunshine, and I am at peace.' Her confidence was not based on what she was doing. Like a child, she placed all her trust in God. As she wrote in one of her prayers: 'In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty

hands'.

May we learn to accept ourselves simply as we are and open our hands and our hearts to receive love from God, our Mother, our Father, who made us and who knows us as we really are. Let us believe that God wants to delight in us, and let us relax back from the foolish path of pride. It is God's love that creates us and holds us in existence. Only God's love can make us truly beautiful with the only beauty that really counts: the beauty of a soul that is open to love and that gives love simply and truly. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.