

Trinity 11 (2nd September 2019) Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries
St Mary's, Barnes
Luke 14. 1, 7-14

A man went to a big banquet in the City of London. As is the custom he looked at the seating plan as he went in the hall. A spasm of displeasure shook him when he saw that he was not seated at the top table. It was not an occasion he enjoyed. All through the meal resentful thoughts came into his mind. Why was old so and so at the top table. What's so important about him? And why is she there? What's so special about her?

In today's Gospel, Jesus told a similar story, only then the seating plan was more flexible. Someone who thought he mattered sat down at the top table and was turfed off when someone more important arrived. Someone who tried to slip into the back unnoticed was called forward. "Friend come up higher". So, as Jesus put it "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Ah, humility, what a wonderful, beautiful virtue.

The great St Augustine of Hippo once wrote to an enquirer who thought too much of themselves "Humility, humility, humility....If you were to ask me what are the instructions of the Christian religion, however often you might repeat the question, I would be disposed to answer always and only "Humility...this most wholesome humility, in which our Lord Jesus Christ is our teacher-having submitted to humiliation that he might instruct us in this-to this humility."¹

But there the problem begins, as we can see in a little story. A boy at school was behaving in a thoroughly, obnoxious boastful manner and was eventually called into the head's study and told to go and practise a little humility. Everything went fine for a while and then the boy reverted to his old behaviour, so he was called in again. "I thought I told you to go and practise a little humility." "I did", replied the boy, "but no one noticed" The desire to be noticed, to be thought important, goes very deep, and any direct attempt to get rid of it runs the risk of it returning in a new form, as we know from another little story about three monks, a Jesuit, a Dominican and a Franciscan talking together. The Jesuit took pride in his order's

¹ St Augustine, Letter CXVIII of 410, The Nicene and Post- Nicene Fathers, Vol 1 pp.446 and 444

education work, the Dominican in Dominican intellectual work. But when it comes to humility, suggest the Franciscan, they are the tops. The quest for humility and indeed the practise of religion as a whole can become just another way of thrusting ourselves forward

What we need is to be taken out of ourselves altogether. We need to be delivered from the whole mode of thinking of whether we are better or worse than other people, more or less important. We need to be taken out of ourselves by respecting and appreciating what is outside ourselves, the wonder and beauty of the world, the sublime love of Christ, the struggling lives of others.

A rather surprising person, D. H. Lawrence put beautifully when he wrote

To be humble before other men is degrading.
I am humble before no man
and I want no man to be humble before me.

But when I see the life-spirit fluttering and struggling in a man
I want to show always the human tender reverence.²

There is true humility.
“But when I see the life-spirit fluttering and struggling in a man
I want to show always the human tender reverence”

That said, we do quite properly reflect on ourselves from time to time, and we ought to, for self-knowledge is fundamental to any healthy religion. The trick here surely, is to have a sober, positive view of ourselves, a positive view inspired by our faith. Each one of us exists as a beloved child of God, created as ourselves. There never has been and never will be anyone the same as us, even if we were cloned, because even from the first each clone would see and experience the world from a different standpoint. We exist as our unique self, loved into being, and loved into the fullness our being through the redemptive grace of Christ. Furthermore, every Christian has a special charisma of the spirit, a special gift just by being the person we are. So, from one point of view we cannot think

² D.H. Lawrence, “Tender reverence”, Complete Poems, ed Vivian de sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, Vol II, Heineman, 1964, p.622

of ourselves too highly. And it is this sense of our great worth that helps us to the respect and appreciation of others, to show always the human tender reverence.

The letters in the New Testament reveal that the small Christian communities springing up all over the Mediterranean were all too fallible and human. They were full of people vying for position, for ways of showing they were better or more important than others. We can I think genuinely thank God that St Mary's is a friendly congregation, without such goings on. What those letters do is not only restate the basic virtues, especially humility but they direct us to the love and example of Christ, classically in Philippians Chapter 2 which begins by setting the standard

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Then it shows us who this can come about

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ^[a] ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ^[b] ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, ^[c] being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Or, as a modern translation puts it. "He made himself nothing"

Earlier I quoted St Augustine "Humility...this most wholesome humility, in which our Lord Jesus Christ is our teacher-having submitted to humiliation that he might instruct us in this-to this humility."

Someone who is humiliated finds humility forced upon them, and there is in fact a link between the two words in the Latin word Humus, earth. And one route to humility is to remind ourselves of the words of Ash Wednesday, "Dust we are and to dust we return"-and we can make ourselves thoroughly melancholic by reflecting on the shortness of life and the insignificance of human life in the scale of evolution. But that is not the Christian way. The Christian way is to reflect on the wonder and beauty of life, of the greatness of God's love who is preparing us for an eternal existence, of the unique person which is each one of us. Out of this overwhelming marvel comes the ability to appreciate the minor marvels of every day and every person-our own being and those around us.