

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon on Sunday 23rd October 2022

Last Sunday after Trinity

St Mary's, 10am Luke 18.9-14

If you look at the back pages of the Church Times, you will find scores of jobs advertised by parishes looking for a new Vicar. What might surprise you and would certainly have shocked an older generation is that amongst them will be very senior jobs, Dean of this or Bishop of that. In the past people got on with their ministry until someone asked them to do something different. Now you have to apply for a post, fill in a CV, get references and go through a succession of interviews. In today's parable I think one of the characters would very much feel at home with this procedure, the other would find it alien. The first one thanked God that he was able to keep the discipline of his religion, giving away a tenth of his money and fasting twice a week. The second one would not even raise his eyes to heaven and simply prayed 'Lord have mercy on me a sinner.'

So, lets imagine the second one being taken aside by a friend of his, who happens to be a career counsellor. First, he is encouraged to have a much greater sense of self-worth. He needs to believe in himself and develop his gifts. He needs to learn how to fill in a good CV setting out all his strong points and showing how he is just the right person for the job.

Now I am not knocking this modern procedure-but why did Jesus commend this man rather than the first one and add 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.'

Humility is one of the great Christian virtues, indeed a virtue so great that unless a person possesses it any other virtue, they might have will go rancid. But Christians have not always understood this virtue

aright. William Blake was someone who had a surer understanding of it as expressed in his poem ‘The Everlasting Gospel’ which begins

Was Jesus humble, or did he

Give any proof of humility

Then he goes on in a series of examples to show that far from being humble. He acted with ‘honest triumphant pride’ So we need to think carefully as to what we mean by humility.

So let me begin by affirming the modern insight. It is good that people should have a sense of self-worth-far too many people are crippled by lacking just this. We should look for any gifts we might have and celebrate them. We should believe in ourselves in the sense that we have something to offer. After all, God believes in us, which is why he creates us and wants us to live in him for ever.

But believing in ourselves is not the end of the matter, it is a prelude to something else. Recently I have been reading some letters of Sister Wendy Beckett, the contemplative nun who suddenly shot to fame on TV as a brilliant art critic. She comes across in these letters as a person of genuine humility, and the secret lies in a casual remark to her correspondent ‘I love admiring people, don’t you? And I am always sad when I can’t be wholehearted about it’¹

A similar remark comes from a more surprising person, the American intellectual Susan Sontag. She wrote.

I’ve always been a great faller-in-love. A great adorer. Bigger than any talent I have, bigger than whatever courage I have, is this desire I have to admire.²

True humility, I would suggest, is rooted in our capacity to appreciate, appreciate the world around us and the qualities of other people. To

¹ (Sister Wendy Beckett and Robert Ellsberg, *Dearest Sister Wendy: A surprising story of faith and friendship*, Maryknole, 2022, p.24)

² (Susan Sontag. The Guardian Weekend, May 27, 2000)

appreciate is to be open to what is there, and because the focus is on the other, there is a self-forgetfulness. And that appreciation can grow into admiration. It is in this also that true worship is rooted, for worship is the recognising of worth-worth-ship. In particular recognising what is good, all good, the supreme good, our true and everlasting good.

So, humility is not about feeling bad about oneself but turning away from the self to be open to the other. A deeply rooted sense of self-worth makes this more possible, and conversely a lack of self-worth is all too likely to end in self-preoccupation.

So, what are we to make of the remark of the person in the parable ‘Lord have mercy on me a sinner’? This expresses a self-awareness that he has not moved very far along the road from self-preoccupation to self-forgetfulness through a focus on the other. We are all on that road, that journey, for this is our journey into God, from being made in his image to reflecting his likeness.

Another surprising person who had a sound sensitivity as to what was truly Christian and what was false was D. H. Lawrence. 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.³

There is true humility. Respect for the other in their pain and struggle, and admiration of their qualities. And for us as Christians this is rooted and grounded in gratitude for the one who gives us our unique self and its qualities, and who in Christ leads us on into a deeper communion with the source of all good.

³ D.H. Lawrence, “Tender reverence”, Complete Poems, ed Vivian de sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, Vol II, Heineman, 1964, p.622

So, it is right to have a sense of self-worth and to value any gifts we might have. But this is the soil in which we grow as a person who looks beyond themselves to others and to God. It is in that growth that genuine humility emerges.