

# PRIDE

G.K. Chesterton wrote in *The Common Man* (1950): If I only had one sermon to preach, it would be a sermon against pride. It is thus an honour to be asked to talk to you on this as the last in your Ecumenical Lent Study Series at Littlemore.

## **This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (Matt 3.17).**

How many of us proud parents are tempted to say this when our own children do well. It does not help that we keep telling them how proud we will be of them when they win the game, pass the exam, beat the bully or even just not cry when they are hurt.

We live in an age when the individual is supreme: autonomy and self-advancement are the keys to getting on in this material life. We promote independence of mind and action at an early age. I am not saying that awareness of one's own responsibilities is a dangerous or bad thing – it clearly is not – but the mistake is in thinking self confidence is enough to make one right. This is the arrogance, born of pride, by which we feel threatened in others, and should guard against in ourselves. As, Matthew writes later in his Gospel: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth* (Matt 5.5).

So why is this sin of pride so dangerous? It is perhaps instructive to us that it is a sort of Janus word having opposite meanings: our English translations of Scripture use it in both positive and negative contexts. This should not surprise us; the seven mortal sins are essentially corruptions of otherwise fundamentally natural and, perhaps, necessary, tendencies. It is when we prevent God from directing these drives that we fall into sin. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we are reminded that God may be angry, take rest, seek pleasure in his creation, and is a jealous God. It is when we, created in the image of God, put ourselves on level with, and some even above, God that we become proud and conceited.

The Book of Sirach (or more familiarly Ecclesiasticus) is a wonderful source of spiritual wisdom. In Chapter 10 the sin of pride is considered: *The beginning of human pride is to*

*forsake the Lord; the heart is withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abomination (Ecclus 10.12), and it concludes: Pride was not created for human beings, or violent anger for those born of women.*

Throughout the Old Testament we are reminded that pride comes before a fall, or more fully from Proverbs 16.18: *Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.* It is not surprising that this delusion of indestructible self-importance is not confined to the individual, as with the Pharisee at prayer or the Prodigal Son's elder brother, both so proud of their piety. The story of Tower of Babel illustrates the pride of a nation intent on reaching Heaven by its own works. And so, as Isaiah tells us: *God will bring down their pride despite the cleverness of their hands (Isaiah 25.11).* Only when that grand and troubled sovereign, King Nebuchadnezzar, allows himself to exalt God above himself he can admit: *Those who walk in pride, He is able to humble (Daniel 4.37).*

So it is our pride that drives out the virtue of humility. As Proverbs again puts it: *A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honour (Proverbs 29.23).* *When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom (Proverbs 11.2).*

The pernicious nature of pride is what Jesus reminds us about in those two parables to which I referred earlier; The Pharisee who stands up and prays about himself, *God, I thank you I am not like other men,* is surely a proud man confident of his own righteousness. Jesus tells us: *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18.14).* The prodigal son's older brother, who has been slaving for his father all his life and never disobeyed an order, is so angry that the fatted calf is killed for his penitent and humbled brother (who blew his inheritance on riotous living and harlots) that he is too proud even to go in to meet his own father. Jesus teaches us that the father had to come out to him and explain that they should rejoice that: *He who was lost is now found (Luke 15.31).*

It is pertinent to remind ourselves how those parables are reiterated in the narrative of Chapter 19 of Luke's Gospel. As Jesus was passing through Jericho he chooses to stay

with the humbled tax-collector Zaccaeus, and is ridiculed by the people muttering that he has gone to be the guest of a sinner. In retort, Jesus proclaims: *The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost* (Luke 19.9).

Jesus also teaches us in the parable of the workers in the vineyard: *The last will be first, and the first will be last* (Matthew 19.18). Every one of us is tempted by this sin of pride, and the more deserving we feel of God's recognition and love, rather than his grace and forgiveness, the further we are from his Kingdom.

How can we as Christians avoid this sin. Prayer is not the simple solution; the self-righteous Pharisee prays. Faithful obedience is not sufficient either, although the father does remind the older son: *You are always with me, and everything I have is yours* (Luke 15.31).

The example we must turn to is God himself. In his love for us, his creation, he was not too proud to take our flesh, as the Collect for the Sunday Next Before Easter (Palm Sunday) puts it: *Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy son, our saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility* (Book of Common Prayer). The humble birth of the Messiah bears witness to God's purpose to exalt those who are meek before him.

Next week is Holy Week. On Sunday we will commemorate Jesus's triumphant procession, on a humble donkey, into Jerusalem with the crowds proclaiming: *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord* (Matthew 21, Luke 19.38, John 12.12).

During Holy Week we will remember in pain, the plot and wrongful arrest, the show trial, the violent torture, brutal humiliation and the crucifixion of our Lord. That God could allow himself to suffer these indignities must surely convince us he is not too proud to save us.

I began this talk with Matthew's account of God's voice from Heaven. The other two synoptic Gospels say: *You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased* (Mark 1.11, Luke 3.22). Unlike Matthew's account these seemingly proud words are not directed at John or the others present at the baptism, but at Jesus. Perhaps this is the moment to consider when the virtue of praise becomes the sin of pride, when our glorification turns to basking in vain glory.

Pride in its positive sense can only be the pleasure derived from the glory of God, in its many manifestations: a job well done; a song well sung; or a race well run. Indeed, Paul exemplifies this when he writes to the Corinthians: *I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged* (2 Cor 7.4). Here it is clear that Paul is not deriving any self-glorification from the ministry of the Christians in Corinth; he is not claiming any credit for the work of the Holy Spirit. Going back to the wisdom writing of Ecclesiasticus, the Lord has not been forsaken.

Paul goes further in his direction to the Galatians: *Anyone who thinks he is something when he is nothing deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load* (Gal 6.4). Our natural feelings of pride ought not to be directed at the expense of others. The *schadenfreude* of those who gloat over the failings and sufferings of others is like the pride of the self-righteous Pharisee; it deepens the gulf between us and God.

James, probably the brother of Jesus, will bring us back to the teaching of the Jewish wisdom literature: *The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower* (James 9.1).

As we prepare ourselves for our Communion this Sunday, or perhaps Easter Day, let us take particular care at the end of our Lenten discipline not to indulge ourselves in pride

that we, perhaps like the Prodigal Son's brother, have been good and virtuous. Instead, we should meditate on the Prayer of Humble Access:

*Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.*

or with the words of the Book of Common Prayer:

*We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.*

The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord.

May we never forsake God, for he will never forsake us.

Amen.