

Friday (St. Therese of Lisieux)

I have always desired to become a saint, but in comparing myself with the saints I have always felt that I am as far removed from them as a grain of sand trampled underfoot is from the mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds. Instead of being discouraged by such reflections, I concluded that God would not inspire a wish that could not be realised, and that in spite of my littleness I might aim to be a saint. 'It is impossible' I said, 'for me to become so great, so I must bear with myself and my many imperfections.' I will seek out a means of reaching heaven by a little way. I will try to find a lift by which I may be raised to God, for I am too small to climb the steep stairway of perfection.

Scripture (Ecclesiasticus 3:17-20,28-29)

My child, be gentle in carrying out your business, and you will be better loved than a lavish giver. The greater you are, the more humbly you should behave, and then you will find favour with the Lord; for great though the power of the Lord is, he accepts the homage of the humble. For the disease of the proud there is no cure, since an evil growth has taken root there. The heart of the sensible will reflect on parables, an attentive ear is the sage's dream.

martben1@btinternet.com

22nd Week of Ordinary Time

Humility: the key to real wisdom

The author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus was a learned and well-travelled man who was well acquainted with the science and philosophies of the Greek cultures. Although he recognised and learned from their wisdom, he knew that the deepest truths lay in listening to God, not human wisdom. In chapter 3, he urges those who wish to learn to be humble in their relationships with God, which will affect their actions and their relationships with others. This humility, (having a low estimate of your own importance, being of a low rank) is demonstrated in the example of being gentle with people we deal with, as opposed to being a lavish giver, (3:17). The first allows the other person not to feel overawed or overwhelmed, whilst the other humiliates by emphasising the giver's own generosity and superior position. This call to humility is more than saying 'act kindly'; it is a profound understanding of our nature, its roots and its growth. The incurable 'malady' of the proud, (3:28) is that they think they have no need of God and so stop listening to his infinite wisdom relying instead on purely human knowledge. In human societies throughout history, the powerful and the elites 'lord it over' others, but for those who believe in God, the higher you rise the more humble you should be. This avoids the danger of forgetting that all success / intelligence / power is from God and keeps in mind that all people are of equal worth in God's eyes. This is a lesson the guests at the meal to which Jesus is invited have clearly forgotten, (Luke 14: 7-14). As with all parables, Jesus' words work at two levels. At the surface, or practical level, Jesus is being extremely rude to his host and fellow guests: the way the guests pick the places of honour is, I think, not so much about them being arrogant as people 'knowing their places' in society, (rather like any social situation where dignitaries or the great and the good are involved today). It is the basis of this 'meritocracy' that Jesus is attacking and is doing so in the context of the new Kingdom he has come to reveal. A wedding feast is a common image for the messianic banquet, and Jesus' conclusion that the 'humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled' is a clear message that a new order, new relationships, will be part of the new Covenant. Jesus' message to his host that he should not have invited guests who can repay him, (this lot!) but a much lower class of person, is decidedly pointed at the surface level, but would be deeply shocking at the 'religious' level: the list of who he should invite, (the poor, the crippled, the blind) are those who are considered unclean, or sinners, people no 'good' religious person would go near, but these are the ones who welcome and respond to Jesus so will be exalted, whilst the Pharisees who reject Jesus will be humbled. Humility is the key to discipleship as it will ensure I have a right relationship with God and with my neighbour. According to society's standards, I can say that I am reasonably intelligent and successful; as a 'professional', I have some standing in the eyes of others. If I am humble, I will recognise that not only do any 'talents' I have not have a huge amount to do with me – it is gift – but also that they are not given for my benefit alone: humility invites me to thank God for them and to offer them to be of use to others. If I am proud, on the other hand, I will congratulate myself for working hard and assume that I the fruits of my labour are for myself. Humility also ensures that my relationship with others flows out of the right relationship with God. directs me, (and the church) to wash feet rather than try to make my way to the top table. Martin Bennett

Monday (Metropolitan Anthony)

Humility does not consist in forever trying to abase ourselves and renounce the dignity which God gives us and demands of us because we are his children not his slaves. The humility of the saints comes from the vision, the glory, the majesty, the beauty of God. It is not even a sense of contrast that gives birth to their humility, but the consciousness that God is so holy, such a revelation of love so striking that the only thing they can do in his presence is to prostrate themselves before him in an act of worship, joy and wonder. This is humility – not humiliation.

Scripture (Psalm 25:1,4-5,12-14)

Adoration I offer, Lord, to you, my God. Direct me in your ways, Lord, and teach me your paths. Encourage me to walk in your truth and teach me since you are the God who saves me. People who respect the Lord, what of them? He teaches them the way they must choose. Neighbours to happiness they will live, and their children will inherit the land. Only those who fear the Lord possess his secret and his covenant for their understanding.

Tuesday (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

Abbess Syncletica said, 'An open treasury is quickly spent; any virtue will be lost if it is published abroad and is known about everywhere. If you put wax in front of a fire it melts; and if you pour vain praises on the soul it goes soft and weak in seeking goodness.' She also said, 'The same thing cannot at once be seed and a full grown bush. So men with a worldly reputation cannot bear heavenly fruit.'

Scripture (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Consider how you were called; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families. No, God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who are common and contemptible – indeed those who count for nothing – to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human might feel boastful before God. It is by him that you exist in Christ Jesus, who for us was made wisdom from God.

Wednesday (Cardinal Basil Hume)

Remain a little person. By this I mean: to remain small in my own estimate of myself, to be unimportant whatever the position I hold or the talents I have. It is to remember that only one thing matters, and that is what God thinks about me. To be high in his regard is the highest ambition any person can have. Smile at yourself, at your failures, at your spiritual incompetence. Have a sense of humour. It does not matter if others do not take you seriously; God will. If you become holy, it is because God made you so. Just keep on trying. That is your part. Success? That is God's gift.

Scripture (Luke 14:7-11)

Jesus then told his guests a parable, because he had noticed how they had picked the places of honour. He said, 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take your seat in the place of honour. A more distinguished guest may have been invited and you may be told "Give up your place to this man." And then, to your embarrassment, you will have to go and take the lowest place. No, when you are a guest, make your way to the lowest place and sit there. Then your host may come and say, " My friend, move up higher." For everyone who raises themselves up will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Thursday (Fr. Michael Ivens, SJ)

Since sin can be committed by a pure spirit (the first sin was that of the angels) sin is not essentially tied to animal passions, the instability of the human make-up, or the dynamics of human society. The essence of sin is, as St. Ignatius defines it: the refusal to 'use' one's freedom to give reverence and obedience to one's Creator and Lord, in short, the refusal to allow God to be God. What is required is a willed co-operation with, and yielding to, the action of the Spirit within the movement from understanding to response.

Scripture (Philippians 2:3-9)

Nothing is to be done out of jealousy or vanity; instead, out of humility of mind everyone should give preference to others, everyone pursuing not selfish interests but those of others. Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are, and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. And for this, God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names.