

Sermon Notes for Trinity 3

humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God (epistle)

Humility is hardly a fashionable virtue. But it is inherent in the New Testament, and indeed applied to Christ himself “he humbled himself” (Philippians 2). So we cannot safely ignore it. If the root of sin is pride, then the contrary virtue of humility is very likely to be an essential building block for the Christian life. The Aristotelian idea that virtues are the middle position between two extremes is sometimes useful, but not here. If we take the fallen state seriously, then we are simply not equipped to have a just estimation of ourselves, neither too high (pride) nor too low (humility in the bad sense of inverted pride). Or rather, we are only equipped to recognise that, in face of God, we are all inadequate – and we only know even this in part. In heaven, we will learn how much worse we were than we thought – and yet that God has been merciful to us.

The “knowledge of good and evil” is not the ability to judge rightly for ourselves. If we are to build on the myth, it is the need to exercise judgement and the probability that we will do so more or less badly. Both our judgement and our choice is impaired – this is not the same teaching as “total depravity” that both are completely corrupted. We need help to be good. Historically, the answer of the Old Covenant is teaching (“law” is not a very good rendering) on God's part and obedience on ours – which means that the humility to recognise our needy condition is essential. There are dangers – hence the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. If teaching is reduced to law, then there is a risk that I will think I have complied and so can look God in the eye. That is incidentally a reason to use the Summary of the Law rather than the Ten Commandments – we may know we have done no murder, but we are unlikely to imagine we have loved God with all our heart.

Humility must begin in the recognition of our inadequacies. We need help, and that help in the New Covenant, as in the Old, includes both teaching on Christ's part and obedience on ours. If that were all, it were the gospel according to Pelagius, who seems to have believed that you should not need any more. He did not deny that more was available. Still his ideal was to be able to say “I am the man God wants me to be, and that by my own effort (apart from the teaching I have received, which is available to all)”. But of course this is to reinstate pride. Practical experience is that we cannot do it; “we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves” is God's judgement on us before it is ours, but we will not grow in grace without making that judgement our own.

We need help, and help is given. “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.” Grace is God's favour and support – indeed his presence. “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time”. This life is a difficult time of trial, of learning the hard way. We do not escape difficulties by being Christians, though perhaps we encounter different difficulties; but always with God's help, if we will use it. We cannot cope; by ourselves we cannot, but the wisdom of humility is to know we do not have to, hence the conclusion “casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you.” And he can bring our life to a successful conclusion, when we take our place in heaven not in our own right but because he has fitted us for it.

I do not propose to give the devil his due. Pride is the danger; because it is the root of sin it is of the nature of the devil to use it. There are no special ways of resisting the devil, only turning to God for help, which we have to do anyway.

Dorothy Sayers gave this warning (in 1941): “Whenever we say, whether in the personal, political or social sphere, 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul' we are committing the sin of Pride; and the higher the goal at which we aim, the more far-reaching will be the subsequent disaster. That is why we ought to distrust all those high ambitions and lofty ideals which make the well-being of humanity their ultimate end. Human happiness is a by-product, thrown off in man's service of God. And incidentally, let us be very careful how we preach that 'Christianity is necessary for the building of a free and prosperous post-war world.' The proposition is strictly true, but to put it that way may be misleading, for it sounds as though we proposed to make God an instrument in the service of man. But God is nobody's instrument.”

“But the God of all grace, who hath called us into his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.”