

22nd Sunday of the Year (C)
(Ecclesiasticus 3:17-20.28-29 / Luke 14:1.7-14)
01.09.2019
Humility

Humility is not a very popular topic in our 21st century society. To remind people that they have to be humble sounds a bit suspicious, and comes across as being paternalistic and even unhealthy.

It is true that, in the past, in Christian Churches, the call to humility was often addressed to particular groups and often meant that they were required to shut up, suffer in silence and not to challenge unjust established social relationships.

For example, in the 1850s, a preacher explained to his congregation that the cause of Christ suffered because of the insubordination of servants and the lack of humility of slaves (cf. *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, edited by Paul Gutjahr). In 1878, another preacher declared that woman's subordination would be most perfectly seen in the "Christian humility and gentleness of her character, and in her indisposition to assume the place or do the work of man" (cf. *History of Woman Suffrage*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton). In the 19th century only women and black people had to be humble!

At the same time, in his novel *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens created *Uriah Heep*, a character who refers constantly to his own "umbleness" but whose obsequiousness and insincerity made his name an insult.

Yet it is not because humility is an easily manipulated virtue that it should be dismissed altogether and considered as irrelevant. When it is properly understood it is a promise for life and good relationships.

In order to clarify the situation, let us begin by a good definition of what humility is about. St Teresa of Avila wrote: "Humility is truth simply" (in *Admirand*, p. 44). Humility is about truth, truth about who I am, who others are and who God is. The truth here begins with what Sr Joan Chittister calls a "proper sense of self" (quoted in *Foulcher*, p. XIX).

To be humble is to acknowledge and accept who we are in truth, without self-loathing and self-exaltation. True humility entails feeling our limitations and our talents; in the same movement, it is knowing our poverty and weakness and also the power of God at work within us which "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ep 3:20).

Sr Joan Chittister sums up the challenge in a very perceptive way. According to her, "when we make ourselves God, no one in the world is safe in our presence. Humility is the basis for right relationships in life" (id.).

Allow me to use an Augustinian image (from *Serm.* 142:5). When we are proud, our head is swollen and then not only are we disfigured, no longer truly ourselves but we take up the whole room, and so there is no space left for others to be themselves. Nobody can exist beside us without being used, manipulated or ignored. Pride propels us into an unreal world. Everything gets out of perspective. When our vision is blurred by pride, we see ourselves as the centre of everything and above everybody.

In order to get rid of the empty air which makes our head so big, our ego so inflated, St Augustine suggests that we take "the medicine of humility".

Humility is intimately linked with awareness of others' needs beyond ours, and not only their needs but, first of all, their God-given right to exist, different to us, able to challenge us and even to disagree with us.

Today humility is a virtue which is particularly needed by many of our political and religious leaders. It is necessary for us to learn anew how to be truthful and respectful in all our relationships so that together we may learn from one another and grow in communion.

In politics and religion, when negotiations fail to break through the deadlock, when talks end in a stalemate, when dialogue becomes impossible, we must acknowledge that most of the time things – or rather people – have been pride-driven.

Too often, the problem is that we think we know better, and not only that, we think that we can know, understand and discern on our own. St Paul's words addressed to the Corinthians should preside at all our meetings: "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror (...). All that I know now is partial and incomplete" (1Co 13:12 NLT).

A Christian plea for humility is a plea for humanity, for respect of full humanity, of human beings as they are in truth: indeed it is a truth which may be – which in fact is always – partial and incomplete; it is a truth which is discovered and embraced as we engage on a journey, in which others play their part.

There is no need for you and me, for our particular Christian Church, our country, or our political party to show off or to trample upon others in order to feel good and of worth. We are called to cultivate humility by letting go of all consideration for status, by stopping to compare ourselves to others, by rejecting our desire to always be the first, the greatest, and the best on our own terms and for our own satisfaction, by embracing who we are in truth without being either judgemental or complacent.

It is true that we have a heavenly vocation. There is deep within us the desire to find a way to heaven where we ultimately belong, we long to reclaim God's image and likeness. The problem is that we overstretch ourselves, we think that we can do this on our own, without God and without others.

St Isaac the Syrian, a 7th century hermit, believed that "everyone who has been clothed with humility has truly been made like unto God."

The height of our humanity, its greatness and glory, its likeness to God are found in the depth of humility, there God reveals himself to us and fills our hearts with his peace and his strength: peace as we embrace who we truly are and strength to continue the journey as we go "from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end." (St Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. in Cant.* 8).