

Trinity XI (20 July 2023)

“For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

+In the Name...

Recently scholars came across an alternative version of the Gospel just read: “Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Continuing Anglican priest, and the other a Continuing Anglican layman. The Priest stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, low-church, uneducated in matters of theology, unappreciative of chant, or even as this layman...” Well, you get the idea. And I could have just as easily switched the roles!

It seems like there is a joke somewhere here: What do a Pharisee and a Continuing Anglican have in common? I wish I had some clever response, but perhaps it hits a little too close to home. I wish I could

say the answer is “nothing”, but if my experience is any indication, it seems there is a great deal in common. “Look at me, look at me,” the Pharisee crows. “Look at how wonderful I am. I do this, I do that. And best of all, I am better than that poor excuse for a human being over there. Doesn’t he wish that he were me?” The saddest part is that the Pharisee might be viewed as better than some modern-day Christians. Our Lord is happy to point out when the Pharisees are being hypocritical, and He does so often. But here the Pharisee is not being hypocritical. He has actually done everything he claimed to have done. The issue is that he equated his good works with the exalted righteousness of God. Only God’s grace and mercy can make a human being worthy to stand in the presence of the Almighty, not our own works. Some Christians today have missed that memo, but in addition are also missing the honesty, however lacking in humility, of the Pharisee.

The truth is, we as human beings always get ourselves into trouble when we want others to recognize us for how wonderful we think we are. Of course, this is not a new problem that started with the founding of the Continuing Anglican movement, or even when Our Lord first encountered the Pharisees. Just a week or so ago we met a particularly unfortunate example in the Old Testament lessons appointed for Evening Prayer – found in Esther. Esther was the Jewish queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus. She had been raised by her cousin Mordecai. After Esther became queen, Mordecai insulted one of the princes of the realm, Haman, by refusing to bow to him, as Mordecai would bow to God alone. Haman was so enraged he concocted an evil plan whereby all the Jews would be exterminated from the kingdom. Haman went so far as to build a special gallows on which Mordecai would be hanged. But it was not to be. The king was reminded that Mordecai had once saved his life, and so Ahasuerus

sought to reward Mordecai. Moreover, Esther revealed her thus-far hidden Jewish ancestry. Haman's treachery was also revealed, and as a result was hanged on his own gallows. Such was his reward for being so pleased with himself and thinking that others should be equally enamored.

But if we think about Biblical, and indeed human, history, we will discover that this deep-seeded desire to puff up ourselves goes back to the beginning. Is it not what happened in Genesis with the parents of the human race, Adam and Eve? God said, "You may eat *anything* in the garden except the fruit from this one tree." So what do we do? With a little help from Satan, who always knows how to appeal to our least attractive qualities, we decided that indeed we were important enough to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and be like God. We can infer that Adam and Eve were thinking, "And then everyone will know how important we are!" I am not sure who

“everyone” would have been at that time, but mankind’s logic has never been fool-proof!

And so it is today that Satan knows how to appeal to our desire to be better than everyone else. He deceived mankind with a false glory, and has been leading us astray with false senses of grandeur ever since. Yet God, being omniscient, knows the devil’s game as well as Satan himself knows it. Think back to when you learned the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost. The very first one is wisdom. God gave mankind wisdom in order that we might know how to keep all the other gifts in check. It is not that God is stingy with gifts, but that we have to have the wisdom to know how to use them and the humility to keep ourselves in check. Humility, brethren, is the foundation of a right relationship with God – and one another. While not technically one of the four cardinal virtues, the Church Catholic generally regards it as falling within the virtue of temperance because it

represses inordinate ambition, yet also precludes us from falling into the opposite error of exaggerated self-abjection. Adam and Eve had pride of place in the human race being the first humans created by God, but they lacked humility. Haman was chosen by King Ahasuerus to be above all the other princes of the realm, but he lacked humility. The Pharisee we meet in today's Gospel lesson spoke the truth: he had done everything he listed, but he lacked humility.

God gives us practical advice through the prophet Jeremiah: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, and let not the strong man glory in his strength, and let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD." None of us have become children of God through our own virtue, through our own wisdom, talent or anything else that we have cultivated.

Humility is an unwelcome trait in much of our post-modern world, but especially in the United States. When I first moved to Washington, DC I met a retired Roman Catholic bishop. Having served parishes in New York City before being made a bishop in the South and finally retiring to Washington, he said to me, “In New York it is all about money, but in Washington it is all about power.”

Are you pleased with some action you have done well? There is nothing wrong with that, but give thanks to the One to Whom thanks is due. Do not consider yourself any better than your neighbor who received a different set of talents. Let us not fall into the easy trap of self-appointed judge where we congratulate ourselves for the good things we have done and absolve ourselves of the evil things we have done.

When it comes to humility, we have no better example than Our Lord Himself: He came to the world as a baby, born not in a luxurious

palace but in a lowly manger. He was obedient to His earthly parents, and obedient to His heavenly Father even to the brutal death of the cross. Yet His life and death were not without purpose. Quite the contrary, in addition to purchasing our salvation, they were an example to many. May we, like Christ, strive to cultivate the virtue of humility. In doing so we will not just aide the cause of our own salvation, but be an example to a world filled with doubt and torn by strife, yet too prideful to realize they are in desperate need of the love of Christ.

+In the Name...