

Trinity XI (11 August 2024)

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

+In the Name...

I have been so good for so many years about watching political shows. That is, I have not done it. It was over 20 years ago that I became a postulant and a priest told me that I should not have political bumper stickers on my car. They practically held my first car together! He is right of course: if the Rector has a “Vote for Bonzo” bumper sticker on his car, then it appears that you need to be a Bonzo supporter in order to be a member of that Church. So, I shall pass up the obvious opportunity to pick on politicians (of both parties) for their lack of humility. I believe it was Mac Davis who made popular the song with the lyrics, “Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble, when you’re perfect in every way!”

Perhaps no less controversial would be to look at marriage.

Now I have a few reasons for choosing this route: 1. I just returned

from my parents' beach trip in honor of their 50th wedding anniversary. 2. Both lessons at Evensong tonight deal with marriage. 3. (Most important): My wife is not here to hear this sermon! Back to number 2. I have been asked before the difference between a homily and a sermon. There is no end to the answers one can get, but one version is that a homily has to be on the lessons for the day while a sermon can be on any appropriate topic. Maybe this will be both then... And perhaps it will encourage you to come back tonight in order to get some additional context for this sermon!

The first lesson tonight will be from the 24th chapter of Genesis. You might remember Abraham, who started out his life as Abram before God changed his name. He and his wife Sarah were afraid that they were not going to have any children, as they were well past childbearing years before Isaac was born. When Abraham was older still, he decided that his son needed to marry a woman from his own country and not from Canaan where they

were living. This was so important that he made his steward swear that he would carry out the task of returning to Mesopotamia to find a bride. Furthermore, the steward had to travel there without Isaac and make the case that this woman should travel a great distance to her new home. Fortunately, the steward makes his way to Mesopotamia, where he asks God to direct him to the woman who has been chosen to be Isaac's wife. No sooner does he utter the prayer than he is introduced to the beautiful Rebekah. The steward meets her family, explains his mission, and Rebekah agrees to return to a new home, one from which she is unlikely to see her family again. Her faith is unshakable, but she agrees to go. Now you can wish courtship would be this easy today, or be glad that contemporary courtship is nothing like this scenario. Either way, I bring it up not only because we get so little Old Testament read to us during the year at our Masses, but also because even though this marriage seemed to be planned in Heaven, it also had its share of challenges. Rebekah will be the mother who convinces

her younger son Jacob to disguise himself as his older brother Esau in order to receive his father's blessing.

Why am I telling you all this and how does it relate to today's Gospel? Our spouses have an uncanny ability, some would say the "duty" to help us in our humility. It is not that only a spouse could fulfill this role; anyone who knows us well could fulfill it. For most of us, our spouse knows us better than anyone else.

It is not that the Pharisee whom we meet in today's Gospel is being untruthful. He is probably not even exaggerating. He has done all those things that he claimed he did: he fasts, tithes to the temple, and does not cheat in business, steal, or cheat on his wife. The problem is that he thinks somehow that earns him a special place in the eyes of God, that it makes him a more worthy human being. He bragged about how wonderful he was while the publican admitted he was a sinner. It is not recorded precisely what sins he committed. As a publican, he was a Jew who worked for the Roman government as a tax collector. He made his living by

adding to what he collected. Because of his trade, he was looked down upon by other Jews: it was bad enough they had to pay taxes to these foreign invaders, but to have it collected by one of their own was unconscionable.

The emphasis here is not even on avoiding sin (although Jesus does encourage that elsewhere), but on taking responsibility for our actions and confessing that sin to God. The publican recognized his sin for what it was. He did not try to blame it on his upbringing, his family, the economy, contemporary Middle Eastern politics, or anything else. He just begged God for mercy, admitting that he had fallen short of what he should have been striving to do.

In one of her classic responses, columnist Ann Landers once said that a marriage license is no more a guarantee of a successful marriage than a fishing license is a guarantee of a successful fishing trip. Both are merely a license to try. A successful marriage is a great love story. God's creation and care for us humans is also

a great love story. Humility is an important ingredient in a successful marriage, but also a successful ingredient in our relationship with God. It flies in the face of what the world tells us: be the best, be the fastest, do not rest on your laurels. Maybe the world needs to sit back and take a breather. Sure: be the best, be the fastest, but recognize those gifts come from God and that we still have failings because what the world values as important is not always what God values as important. I would suggest that the gulf between the two is getting ever wider.

So, it is really not as simple as just replicating the behaviour of the Publican. In fact, it is not an either/or situation so much as a both/and: strive to obey God's commands like the Pharisee, but be as honest with yourself and God as the publican. When we exhibit that humility, we can expect Our Lord to welcome us as His own.

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