

HUMILITY

The message in the gospel reading we have just heard this morning is very clear, humility is to be valued while ostentatious vanity is to be avoided. Jesus was reminding his audience, particularly the scribes and pharisees with whom he is perpetually grumpy, that making visible the belief that “I am more important than others” is morally flawed. Jesus regarded pompous people as those who were religious on the outside but proud and immoral on the inside. In another exhortation Jesus tells people that the generosity of the widow giving a mite, which was all she had, is far more sacred than big donations made by rich people who probably would not miss the monies given away. Anonymous generosity has a high moral value in a way that visible generosity does not. Being generous, knowing that we will be repaid, is maybe just simply transactional whilst giving without any expectation of reciprocity is a highly sacred thing. Generosity is a sacred thing, provided it is not enacted out of a sense of duty, or self-interest or to enhance our sense of superiority. Sacred generosity has been described as the “uncontrollable outflow of love”.

Seeing ourselves as a big fish, in even a small pond, can be very seductive. Prestige and power are dangerous things as they can tempt us to feel superior to others and may encourage us in failing to love our neighbour as we called to do. When we are honoured, formally or informally, humility can be in danger of being banished. However, I am often struck by the way in which publicly honoured people often respond by acknowledging that the recognition actually belongs to a whole team of people. All of us are standing on the shoulders of our mentors and people who have come before us.

The readings from Jeremiah and the psalmist, we heard this morning encourage us to gratefully acknowledge our good fortune rather than simply take it for granted. That sense of entitlement which believes that we somehow “deserve” our blessings, or that we have earned them, is a profoundly profane thing. The lack of gratitude reeks of vanity, one of seven deadly sins. And in a classic example of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God, Jesus tells his audience that “those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled”.

Humility in conversation requires us to actively listen to understand different perspectives, to treat others with courtesy and kindness and to extend care and consideration to them. We are called to celebrate radical inclusion with unconditional love.

Thomas Hardy was hugely successful author in his day; his publisher would essentially publish **anything** he wrote. Nevertheless, whenever Thomas sent off a manuscript, he would always include a stamped addressed envelope in case it was rejected! Delicious modesty.

Oscar Wilde on the other hand, when asked had he anything to declare at a customs post replied “I have nothing to declare apart from my genius”!

When I read this morning’s gospel in preparation for this homily, I was reminded of a Royal Variety Performance in London. Dame Edna was brought into the Royal Box. Prince Charles, as he was then, broke into loud laughter and Camilla giggled as Dame Edna greeted them with her usual “Hello possums”! Shortly afterwards an usher entered the Royal Box, and whispered something into Dame Edna’s ear. She stood up said “Sorry possums, but they have found me a better seat”!! The royal couple were tickled pink with this classic Dame Edna comedy and I love the story because it celebrates the humour of the absurd.

The challenge posed to us this morning is to actively consider how we in our own lives practice what Jesus was preaching. Can we celebrate the gifts of empathy and imagination by using them to graciously respect others. The Australian novelist, Anna Funder, has written that to “**imagine** the life of another is an act of compassion as holy as any, and that morality has **empathy** at its core”. This takes courage as well as humility. And Aristotle tells us that without courage there is no other virtue.

There is a lovely Irish tradition in which an extra place is always set at the dinner table. Some say this is in case an unexpected guest turns up, but others say it acknowledges the invisible presence of Jesus who is always with us.

The prophet Micah gets the last word this morning as he invites us to “act justly, to love mercy and to walk **humbly** with our God”. Amen