

A Humble Pride

It would have sent shock waves through the crowd.

You see, Pharisees were the good guys, the religious elite, held in the highest regard. They were the ones, it was believed, whose faithfulness to God kept the nation afloat. Tax collectors, on the other hand, well, they were scum, a blight on the nation, collaborators with a Roman occupation, thieves.

We're told that Jesus tells this story for the benefit of those who were confident of their own right-standing before God and who looked down their noses at others.

Often, this parable of the snooty, self-righteous Pharisee and the hang-dog tax collector, is held up as a morality tale, contrasting the sin of pride with the virtue of humility.

But is pride always a sin?

We use that word both positively and negatively. 'Pride comes before a fall', we say; needs swallowing if we're to mend a friendship, we say. And yet, we're encouraged to take pride in our appearance, our identity, in our achievements and in those of others; the pride and delight we feel for instance as we watch our six-year-old launch off on their first ever non-assisted bike-ride. Or, that euphoria when our football team score the winning goal. That moment when we realise that it's OK, in fact, it's bloody marvelous to be 'me'.

The researcher Brene Brown makes a distinction between the word 'pride' and 'hubris'. 'Pride' she says is a healthy thing; 'a feeling of pleasure or celebration related to our accomplishments or efforts'. Hubris, on the other hand, 'is an inflated sense of one's own innate abilities that is tied more to the need for dominance than to actual accomplishments' It's closely related to narcissism, that craving for validation and admiration, which Brene defines as, 'the shame-based fear of being ordinary'. The higher the hubris, the higher the narcissism; the higher the narcissism, the lower the self-esteem. Interesting.

So, pride isn't a sin, hubris is. The Pharisee is a narcissist, desperately trying to convince himself and others, that he's far from ordinary, that he's super-righteous. This Pharisee isn't praying to God, he's praying to himself and anyone else who'll listen.

What about the tax collector? Is he, as Jesus seems to be saying, an example for us all?

The tax collector stands at a distance, head bowed. He can't even look up, instead he beats his breast in typical near-Eastern fashion, praying 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner'.

The monk Thomas Merton, a spiritual hero to many, once prayed a similar prayer; 'Have mercy on my darkness, my weakness, my confusion. Have mercy on my infidelity, my cowardice, my turning about in circles, my wandering, my evasions. I do not ask for anything but such mercy, always, in everything, mercy... Guide me, make me want again to be holy, to be a man of God, even in desperateness and confusion. I do not necessarily ask for clarity, a plain way, but only to go according to your Love, to follow your mercy, to trust in your mercy'.

Both prayers are recognitions of brokenness, pleas for God's mercy, for grace to prevail. It's true of course that we can never undo what's done, but by God's grace and mercy, all things can be re-created, redeemed.

When we feel like we've fallen from grace, to pray 'Lord, have Mercy' is to fall right back into grace. In fact, forget that, you can't fall from grace, ever. Always, always we're falling *into* it. And the work of grace is to redeem, to make whole; to use Thomas Merton's language, to make holy.

So then, is the tax collector an example for us all, or just for those, as the writer says, who are confident of their right-standing before God, and look down their noses at others?

Well, I'm guessing I'm not the only one who does that. To be human is to be insecure, right? We probably don't all have that narcissistic shame-based fear of being ordinary, but none of us want to be at the bottom of the pile. In the kindest possible way, we all need someone to look down on.

There will be times when we all have to come to God as the tax collector did, broken, bruised, sorry once again for messing up. Sin, that human propensity to mess up, is a truth about us all. But hear this, it is not the *whole* truth. The whole truth is that we are the beloved, always and forever held in grace. The whole truth

is that we can stand proud in the presence of God, because in the eyes of God, we are and always will be his delight.

It's a sad irony that when people think of the Christian Church, often they think of the Pharisee and not the tax collector. If we were only to own our failing rather than police the failing of others; if we were to speak more of our shared humanity, rather than ideals, if we were truly to 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly', the world would listen.

Back to the ever-insightful Brene Brown: 'Humility' she says, 'is openness to new learning, combined with a balanced and accurate assessment of our contributions, including our strengths, imperfections, and opportunities for growth'. A humble person freely admits and takes responsibility for their failings; they have nothing to prove, and nothing to protect. They're genuinely interested in and rejoice in the strengths of others. They are always travelling, never arriving; always open to what can be learnt en-route.

Often humility is forged in crisis where we discover what foundations our lives are actually built upon. Crisis teaches us what we're living for.

Albert Einstein is supposed to have said 'There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is'.

For me, that's the foundation of humility; receiving all life as miracle; rejoicing in the words of Richard Rohr, that this Christ-soaked world is both the hiding place and the revelation of God.

So, in those words of the ancient prophet Micah, our calling is simple - 'to act justly, to love mercy and walk humbly with our God'

How do we learn to love mercy? I guess by living it one decision at a time, to pray to see others as God sees us. And how do we walk humbly with God and with others? I guess a good place to start is to live 'to get it right, not to be right'. And, to cultivate wonder. Because when we see, when we really see the miracle that surrounds us, life can never be ordinary again. Our world will be transfigured, and in time, so will we.

Luke 18 ⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Micah 6 v 8

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