

Our theme today is humility, not a particularly celebrated virtue these days. And it's not actually clear where one goes to for guidance on the subject.

There was a very famous English Lord called the Earl of Longford who wrote a book on the subject of humility. I'm not sure whether he was being ironic when he wrote this about the book, "In 1969, I published a small book on humility. It was a pioneering work which has not, to my knowledge, ever being superseded." I rather fear that he wasn't being ironic because I came across this in his 1994 autobiography, "I still feel today that anyone who is seriously interested in the concept of humility would benefit from reading my little book."

Lord Longford here is sounding a lot like the elderly rabbi who was on his death bed, and he called his disciples to gather around his bed. And there was much wailing and crying as they mourned his passing, and the first one said, "Dear rabbi. You're so pious. Who is going to teach us to pray when you're gone?" Another said, "Your teaching on the subject of ethics was so outstanding, how are we going to know how to behave? You've taught us so much." And the third one said, "And your wonderful intellect. Your learning. That will stay with us over the years." The rabbi opened his eyes, sat up and said, "And yet? About my humility, you say nothing?"

Humility is like underwear. We all need to have it, but we shouldn't let it show. So I haven't found Lord Longford's book helpful, but I have found what Saint Paul wrote on the subject to be of great interest. He wrote this about humility in his magnificent passage in Philippians that we heard earlier. He does two things. In the first few verses of that reading, he sets out the principles of humility. He identifies as doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit regarding others as better than ourselves and looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. And then in the second more poetic part of that reading, he shows how Jesus lived a life which embodied these principles. And this is the part of the passage on which I want to focus as I draw out three characteristic elements of Jesus' humility.

The first characteristic regards identity. Jesus had a strong sense of who He was. He knew himself to be in the form of God, to be one with God, but He did not regard equality with God something to be exploited.

Warren Bennis, the leadership guru, wrote this, "Humble people are notable for their self-possession. They know who they are, have healthy egos, and take more pride in what they do than in who they are." In other words, we're not to confuse humility with meekness or mildness.

Humility is not for wimps. The strength of a truly humble person is their self-confidence and their strong sense of identity and worth. They are people who don't need to be constantly puffing themselves up. They don't feel the need to construct their own sense of self.

Jesus models this in our gospel reading. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the time, the opponents of Jesus, saw the miracles that He did and came up to Jesus and asked, "Who gave you the authority to do these things?" If ever there was a do-you-know-who-I-am moment in the gospels, this is it.

There's a very famous restaurant in London called the Ivy. Actually, I think it's closed recently, but it was well known as a celebrity hangout and somewhere that it was very difficult to get a table. And one day, a very pompous man arrived at the front desk and said to the maître d', "I'd like a table for two, please." The maître d' said, "I'm terribly sorry. There's nothing available tonight." And the man puffed out his chest, swelled up and said, "Do you know who I am?" The maître d' turned round, banged on his table, and as the chatter subsided, he said, "Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you, but does anybody know who this gentleman is? He seems to have forgotten. Can anybody help?"

Jesus could have got on his high horse here with the Pharisees. "Don't you know who I am," He could have said. "I'm from God. I'm of God. And I'm speaking with divine authority," but He didn't. He acted out of humility and responded to their question with another question. Jesus was secure in His own identity. He had a strong sense of self.

The word humble comes from the Greek word humus, which means earth or clay. It speaks to me of that image of the Bible of us as clay pots in God's hands. Saint Paul says we are jars of clay with treasure within. And that I think is a wonderful way for us to understand ourselves, to root our sense of identity and worth there. We're clay pots with treasure within. That's an image that speaks both to our preciousness and also to our weakness. We can either be too aware of ourselves as treasure or go to the other extreme and see ourselves as worthless. The truth is, we're ordinary clay with treasure within. We are God's creatures. We are God's children. We don't need to construct an identity for ourselves beyond that. Christian humility begins with recognizing who we are in God and finding our true identity there.

The second characteristic of Jesus' humanity is His obedience. Saint Paul says, "Jesus emptied Himself and being found in human form, He humbled Himself and

became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Thomas à Kempis said, "The more humble a person is in themselves and the more obedient towards God, the wiser they are and the more their soul will be at peace." To obey someone isn't just to agree with them. It must involve doing something. We can read Jesus' parable about the two sons in the gospel that we have just heard as a story of humility and obedience. Jesus draws a contrast here between two sons, both are told by their father to go and work in the vineyard. One says, "No," but eventually obeys and goes. The other said, "Yes, sir, I'm going," but didn't.

Now the story upset the Pharisees, as they knew they were being compared to the son who said the right thing, but did nothing. They knew all the right answers. They were very religious, but they talked the talk without walking the walk. They despise the tax collectors and prostitutes with whom Jesus spent His time. The pride of the Pharisees led them to look down on others, as they thought of themselves as better than they were. But Jesus recognized that whilst these sinners may not have got the message right away or always said the right things or behaved in the right way, they eventually followed Him. And when they followed Him, they obeyed His teaching.

It's clear from the gospels that following Jesus means walking His ways. It's not simply about doing the right religious things or saying the right religious words. It's about obedience and action. Working out His call in our life to walk with Jesus in the way of the cross in our daily lives. That's the way to avoid pride and practice humility.

The great Hudson Taylor, a missionary famous for his work in China, was invited to speak at a church in Melbourne, Australia. And the leader of the service gave a very long introduction to the missionary and spoke of him in very eloquent and glowing terms as he told the congregation all the work that Hudson Taylor had done in China, and then he presented him as "Our illustrious guest." Hudson Taylor stood quietly for a moment and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends. I am the little servant of an illustrious master."

The third characteristic of Jesus' humility was trust. The passage in Paul continues, "Because of Jesus' obedience, God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow." Jesus was humble enough, confident enough in His own identity and obedient to the will of His Father that He felt no need to exalt Himself. He entrusted Himself completely to His Father. "Not My will, but Yours be done," He said, the night before He died. God, the Father in His own time exalted Him.

Our obedience will inevitably lead us to trust God and His plans for our life. We need to learn to trust and claim for ourselves the great promises of the Bible, that our lives are in God's hands and that He is working His purposes out. Saint Peter said, "God will lift us up in due time."

I once heard a Pentecostal preacher say this... I can't say it in the energetic way in which I first heard it said, but I can at least remember the words. He said this, "Whatever God tells me to do, I'm going to do it. If He says jump through that stone wall, I'm going to jump at it. Going through it belongs to God. Jumping at it belongs to me." Humility involves obedience and trust.

I want to sum up what I've been saying about humility with a story that was a favorite of the great German reformer, Martin Luther. He was fond of telling the story of two goats that met in the mountains on a very narrow ledge. They were coming at opposite directions. On one side of them both was a steep, sheer drop, on the other side was an enormous cliff. There was no room to turn around, no room to pass. So what did they do? How did they solve their dilemma? They could have fought. They could have butted heads, but no, according to Luther, they had more sense than that. One of them lay down on the path, and the other literally walked over them to the other side, and both were safe.

That is the way of humility. That is the way that Jesus modeled for us. And that is the way that He calls us to follow.

Amen.