A Sermon

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by

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# The Grace of Humility

> Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves (Philippians 2.3).

This advice to the bickering Christians of Philippi presented them with a tall order. Indeed, the grace of humility is an awkward topic. Can this aspect of Christian thought make sense today? Is humility discredited? Leaving aside grace for the moment, what exactly is humility? The word derives from *humus*, earth, and suggests being close to the earth. By extension it means being lowly, not thinking highly of oneself or claiming an exalted position. The corresponding Greek term means 'low' (Ταπεινος). Thus understood humility is a core Christian value, also prominent in Islam (in its rejection of *istighna'* (self-sufficiency) and the arrogance of the 'Time of Ignorance' (*jahiliyyah*) and Buddhism (in its embracing of emptiness). But that humility is good is not self-evident. Whereas being 'down to earth' is worth while, a good trait, to call someone earthy or lowly or to call something low is not a compliment. It suggests rather what is base, submissive, or abject.

So it is a paradox of Christian thought that God took the form of Jesus and came down to earth, 'took upon himself the form of a servant' (Philippians 2.7). He shared our habitat and modest status and treated us as in some sense brothers.

> For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren (Hebrews 2.11. There are part parallels in the 'renunciation' of Buddha and the 'surrender' of Mohammed).

As part of this sharing he not merely acted with humility but exposed himself to humiliation. Jesus was accused of being a rebel, sentenced to death and executed by way of precaution, in case the Roman provincial governor should be blamed for taking the threat of rebellion too lightly.[1] This paradoxical descent and exposure was in the Christian view not arbitrary. It had a clear purpose, to save humans from their natural tendency to go astray, to do wrong and to suffer lethal consequences.

Thus interpreted, the role of Jesus in both gospels and epistles leads, whatever the nuances of the surviving texts, to an emphasis on the need for humans to be humble. To enter the kingdom one must become like a child (Matthew 18.1–6 cf. Mark 9.36–37; Luke 9.46–47). One who sits in the lowest place will be told by the host to go up higher. The poor in spirit (the 'beggarly' (Πτοχοι)) and meek are blessed, for the kingdom is theirs; they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5.3, 5). The self-critical prayer of the corrupt tax collector is to be preferred to that of the Pharisee who thinks himself morally superior (and no doubt keeps the rules), who 'trusts in himself that he is righteous and despises others' (Luke 18.11–14).

We should attend to our own serious defects ('the beam in one's own eye') before tackling the defects of others ('the mote in thy brother's eye') (Matthew

1 D. Liebs, *Vor den Richtern Roms. Berühmte Prozesse der Antike* (2007) ch. 9 'Vorsorglich gekreuzigt'.

7.3–5). These endorsements of humility are taken to derive from the mind of Christ,

> who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him (Philippians 2.5–9).

Or, as another epistle puts it,

> our Lord Jesus Christ though he was rich yet for our sake he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8.9).

A Christian should presumably follow Christ's example of humility. In ordinary humans it has, first, an internal and an external aspect. Internally it requires us to accept that we are not better than others. We do not know enough to judge others and to God we are all equally valuable and equally sinful. We should echo this, refrain from judging and regard others as our equals or betters.

> Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves (Philippians 2.3).

So much for the internal aspect. But humility also concerns what we do. To behave in a way that implies a claim to moral, social or intellectual superiority is wrong, for it embitters social relations. Does that rule out the ambition to excel? Apparently not. The wish to be highly regarded, 'to sit up higher', 'inherit the earth' or 'become rich' is not condemned. What is condemned is the assumption that my status or desert gives me a right to these blessings.

But the attitudes described, which encompass a mean between pride and abasement, are mainly negative. Do they exhaust the Christian understanding of humility? It seems not. We must add, first, a positive requirement: the need to be self-critical, to examine one's own shortcomings. In addition, we must be willing to endure hardship, to suffer, indeed to be humiliated.

> For we glory in tribulation also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience experience, and experience hope (Romans 5.3–4).

This willingness may involve self-sacrifice. But willingness to endure suffering must be in the interests of what is right.

> Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake (Matthew 5.10–12 cf. Luke 6.22–23).

It cannot therefore be correct to assert, with Augustine, that 'the whole Christian religion is humility'. Humility is a key element, not the whole. It inculcates a proper attitude to God, to oneself and to others but also underpins the promotion of what is right. It is meant for a purpose. Hardship and persecution, after all, fall on those who stand up for what they conceive to be right, and if necessary defy authority. Those who defer to authority escape persecution. So

humility is valued not only for its own sake but in connection with the pursuit of what is right.

Is humility then, as the title given to the sermon suggests, a grace? Or is it a virtue, or both, or neither? A grace is a gift bestowed on us by God, not something we earn or deserve. Indeed we have no deserts. 'Who made you different? What have you that you did not receive?' (1 Corinthians 4.7.) Whether to receive grace requires an effort on our part has been and is debated. At least one element of collaboration is required, that the person on whom grace is bestowed should be receptive, should welcome the gift and be thankful for it. Since most of us are naturally inclined to exaggerate our own merits it seems correct to speak of humility as a grace that some are lucky enough to receive.

Is it also a virtue? Virtues are more closely related to what we do. They are, the philosopher Philippa Foot points out, in a general way beneficial, since they serve good ends. They are also designed to correct or forestall faults, to help us resist temptation and remedy defects in our motives.[2] Virtues call for positive action. We should pursue them and try to bend our will towards them. In that respect they differ from the gifts of grace. Of the various elements that comprise humility, modesty can certainly on this score be accounted a virtue, one that we should pursue, avoiding vanity on the one hand and self-abasement on the other.

Yet is this a virtue in everyone in every situation? Courage is a virtue, but courage in a bad cause, for instance in a fearless racketeer, is not in him a virtue, though it is for most people and in most circumstances. Similarly with humility. It would not have befitted Churchill in the second world war or Montgomery at Alamein to have displayed humility, even had it been in their character to do so. Circumstances may demand self-assertion and call for a leader who is prone to what is in general a vice.

So humility can be both a grace and, for most people and in most situations, a virtue. But what of the counter argument that it is worthless, even vicious? To Hume

> every quality which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others is allowed to be part of personal merit

and

> no other will be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion.

Humility along with self-denial and silence he classes with the

> whole train of monkish virtues ... which are everywhere rejected by men of sense, because they serve no manner of purpose: neither advance a man's fortune on the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society, neither qualify him for entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment.

The so-called monkish virtues are not virtues.

2 Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (1978, 2002) 2, 8.

This is not one of Hume's better passages. Silence and self-denial, for example, are often sources of reflection and creativity, not merely in a monastery. Their merits are too little regarded at the present day. Hume confines worthwhile ends to those commonly judged to be useful or agreeable, and overlooks the fact that many valuable pursuits, for example in science, art and sport, are neither obviously useful nor generally admired. Indeed this is true of minority pursuits and values in general. As regards humility Hume's point is perhaps that unquestioning obedience is a vice. That is true, but the Christian acclaim for fortitude in the face of persecution calls for defiance, not deference.

If Hume's view of virtue is too worldly, Nietzsche, treating the morality of pity, regards humility along with most other-regarding virtues (as we think of them) as plainly evil.

> We need a critique of moral values, the value of these values themselves must be called in question (*The Genealogy of Morals*, preface 6).

If we do this, we reject, among others, pity: 'the suffering of others infects us; pity is an infection' (*The Will to Power*, 368). In Nietzsche's view the man professing Christian virtue is sick, deeply malicious to himself and others. To favour the weak at the expense of the strong makes for the degeneration of the human race.

The philosopher here reflects a version, popular at the time, of Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' that treated the capacity to survive not just as an explanation of evolution but as embodying a moral aim. By adopting it we could side with 'ascending' rather than 'descending' types, those destined to come out on top.[3] That view generated a form of racial pride so arrogant and destructive that it has fallen from favour.

It might revive. In any case, there remains the question whether humility still has something of value to offer to non-Christians or atheists. I think it has. Genetic arrogance is not the only form of arrogance to have been prominent in modern times. Intellectual superiority is a besetting sin of us academics. We need to keep in mind that science along with other forms of research is an exploration of the unknown. Fortunately the area of the unknown does not shrink. Think of dark matter, said to comprise much of the universe, and dark energy, said to account for its expansion. A leading academic once said that research is doing work that need not be done again. That was a mistake. Research is never final. It always needs to be done again, perhaps after an interval.

But let me end by focussing on a form of self-assertion that has become prominent in our age, the ban on self-criticism that is often connected with the founding of states. Since the world is organised in states, the creation of a new state can be treated by its members, or many of them, as excluding moral criticism. One need think only of the immunity of some liberators from colonial rule, such as the liberator of Zimbabwe. An example that remains current after nearly a century is that of the Armenian genocide of 1915–6. Since those atrocities were closely followed by and perhaps made possible the creation of a new state, the connection

3 Foot, *Virtues and Vices* 81–5.

is still, officially, a non-subject in that state.

From this Taner Akçam, Turkish historian of the genocide, draws a valuable lesson.

> To prevent the recurrence of such events people must first consider their own responsibility, discuss it, debate it, and recognize it. In the absence of such honest consideration, there remains the high probability of such acts being repeated, since every group is inherently capable of violence; when the right conditions arise this potential may easily become reality, and on the slightest of pretexts. There are no exceptions. Each and every society needs to take a self-critical approach, one that should be firmly institutionalised as a community's moral tradition, regardless of what others might have done to them.[4]

This modern updating of original sin serves as a reminder that there are still contexts in which humility is neither discredited nor outdated.

4 T. Akçam, *A Shameful Act* (1999, 2007) intro. x.