The University Sermon

on the

Grace of Humility

Preached
in the Chapel

of

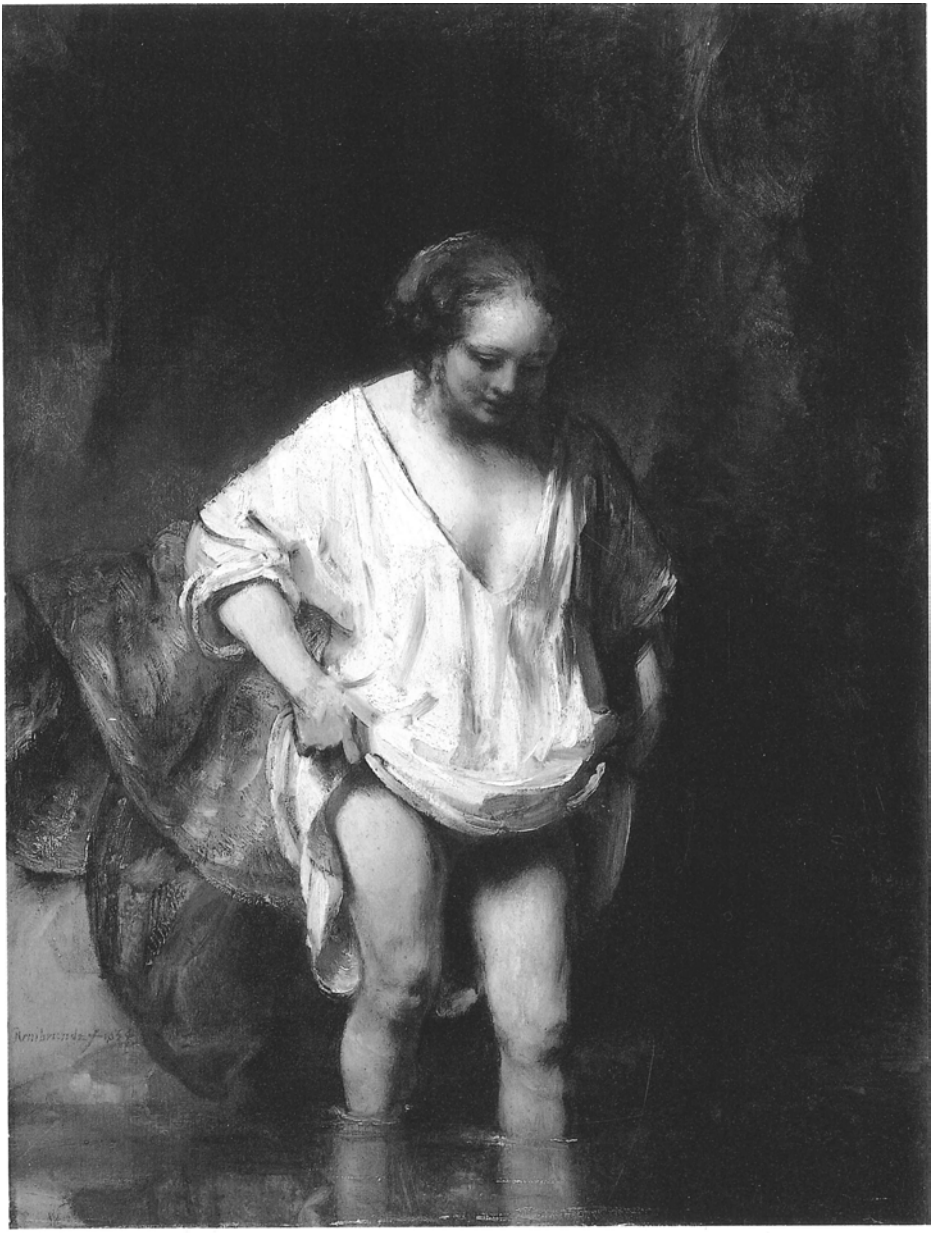
ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

The Chaplain

on

Sunday, 15 February 2015



The Grace of Humility

In 1653 a little book called *Essays and Observations Theological and Moral* was printed and published in Oxford. It was written anonymously by someone calling himself 'a student of theology'. He was actually a young fellow of Merton called William Master according to his contemporary Mertonian, the antiquary Antony Wood. There was not much theology in it. There was too much of that around already, stoked by those contemporaries 'who' as Master wrote bitterly, 'take upon themselves to be Daniels, persons greatly beloved of God and yet have no better authority for their assurance, than that of a presumptuous fancy'. With the very constitution of England, church and state, in the melting pot, strident polemic abounded, not least in the pulpits. 'The world', Master wrote, 'certainly is grown in all respects more peevish and ill-natured of late than formerly'. 'How many busy brains', he went on, 'take upon them to read the secrets of others hearts is then most dangerous when it swayeth the pulpit'. So he urged preachers, 'the unadvised Boanerges [sons of thunder] of the pulpit carefully to examine the ground on which they plant their terrible artillery'. Examining the ground of things, so as to undermine zeal, put the author among those Christians who reacted against dogma in the name of reason, charity and empirical reflection, and brought on the enlightenment. 'It is my duty', he wrote, 'to walk charitably … my hopes are fullest there where I see Christian lenity [gentleness] most approved and practised'. Humility emerged to be the theme of the book and pride its target. His shrewd awareness of the ground of his own moralising shows in his prayer

> Suffer me not to think the pride of my heart then mortified, when charmed only by some passionate reflection or warm application [such as a poultice].

> Suffer me not to think it extinct, when withdrawn only, or hid in some corner of my breast.
>
> Suffer me not to make terms with this enemy, or conceit I am humbled, and be proud in that.

In his will of 1684 he left five pounds to the University for two sermons annually, one on pride and the other on humility. He knew them to be very important subjects, humility the trickier of the two. When the Warden invited me to preach the one on the Grace of Humility I demurred but I lacked enough humility to refuse. So now I am to hold forth about humility, having spared no pains to work out a sermon which might be approved, perhaps even admired, by an erudite and exacting audience.

I understand humility as requiring an overcoming, or escape from, the egoism we are born with – and 'not by might master'd, but by special grace'. It is unwise to let any of the virtues out on its own beyond the bond of charity. Humility needs the company of justice to give it objectivity and backbone – not least to give it a certain directness which excludes affectation. This directness is best achieved by the eye taking in an image so I will conclude with the two images you have with you. The eye is quicker than the labouring mind.

'The Grace of Humility': for the Christian theology with which Master was familiar, grace was supernatural. That is at least to say, in terms acceptable to those who are chary of the supernatural, that genuine humility does not come naturally to us. 'Humility' wrote Iris Murdoch, 'is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice; it is selfless respect for reality, and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues' (*The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge 1970, p. 93). We may gather several things from that dictum: that humility is both of the utmost importance in leading any kind of a good life; but that it is also very difficult indeed to attain; and that this is because our ineluctable selves and ineluctable reality are at odds with each

other. To be on good terms with reality we must somehow or other become selfless, overcoming the entirely natural impediment of seeing the real world as centred on ourselves. This has been succinctly called by Simon Weil 'the illusion of perspective': the physical world represented and so distorted as relative to the unrelativised viewing self.

There is a vivid image of this state of affairs in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

> Your pier-glass [mirror] or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place it now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles around that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, it is light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.

The parable puts in a nutshell, as parables should, the moral preoccupation of the whole novel. George Eliot often refers to two webs. One is the web which our imagination weaves, spider-like, to nourish our hungry, central selves on the world's creatures. The other is the real web, multi-centred with the innumerable knots which connect person to person in society. How may her characters disentangle themselves from the solipsistic web and take their place in the social one? That is the drama: not only of every life, but of every day, every job of work, committee meeting or homecoming in which we negotiate the relativising or democratising of the self.

'The candle is the egoism of any person now absent'. In their catty way ('Let's talk about *other* people') those words are very shrewd. It is simply the case that we see the world from the central point of self. This is perhaps what is meant by original sin, an

unavoidable fault confirmed by our upbringing. William Master himself noticed that 'the lavish praise men bestow upon their juvenile attainments makes them think that they are come to their *non ultra* [ultimate perfection] then'. The effusion of flattery poured out on infants when they eat or walk or use the lavatory must make them think that they are very special and give them an appetite for, even a right to, praise, though in fact it is an expression of relief that they are capable of joining ordinary, unprivileged society.

This gets corrected as children are civilised, but the taste for congratulation, nourished by parental loving care or exacerbated by parental indifference, remains. Good conversationalists are ambivalent in this regard. On the one hand they want to entertain and please. No less a practitioner of the art than Sir Isaiah Berlin owned that this beset him continually, no doubt reinforced by his being wonderfully good at it. On the other hand they put self-display aside and listen carefully to their interlocutors and

> Mark what another says: for many are
> Full of themselves, and answer their own notion.

– good advice from George Herbert. Self-assertion and altruism both play their parts in any lively exchange, and the humility of a just self-awareness is the best sort of control for each.

'Just' is the word to pick out of that sentence. Justice is integral to humility, and it is obviously more urgent and better to go for justice than cultivate humility, which will then look after itself and be added unto us. Before justice, that most entertaining talker of the early nineteenth century, the Reverend Sydney Smith, drew himself up short. He fought for it on many fronts: Catholic emancipation and the abolition of the game laws, to name two. In conversation his hilarious wit and the delight of his audience would stimulate a recklessness of exhilaration which could carry him further than he should really have gone, reducing even himself to a regretful silence after some brilliant demolition. So in a

sermon 'On the Judgments we form of Others' he spoke as an expert.

> To promote the righteous judgment of our neighbour, it is our duty to defend him where we can do so with any colour of justice. This we are frequently prevented from doing, because it is unpopular. It checks a source of amusement from which we are all apt, at times, to derive but too much pleasure, it recalls those who hear us from a state of mirth, and compels them to listen to the dry, unamusing suggestion of justice … While others listen eagerly to the narrative of folly and crime, and every one secretly exults and says, thank God, I am not as this man is – forget not thou thy absent brother and, in the midst of his enemies, let thy voice be heard for the defenceless man.

'The dry and unamusing suggestions of justice': those are strong words of self-resistance from Smith and draw our attention to justice as, like reason, a robust ally of humility, rescuing it from being any kind of craven abasement. Justice treats all alike, having no truck with the exceptional self. No one is special and it is blind to privilege, all being equal in its undeluded sight. These being its principles, it works hard through controversial argument to achieve them. Direct access to the facts is its aim, and argument on the level ground its method: who was where when, who saw them there and so on. This directness, this refusal to have other interests in view, however beguiling, is the character of justice.

With directness we have discovered the thing which fits William Master's categorising humility as a grace. Grace is pure and simple. It has no other ends in view. But it does not, for that reason, come naturally or easily – for all that, when it has come, it looks like the simplest thing in the world. Contrariwise pride, the subject of his other sermon, is sin; which can denote a fatal error of judgment when it is distracted or swerved by 'the care of other things', whatever they might be, from direct aim at the truth.

Here is an instance of directness from the realm of justice. There was a clergyman who had long worked as a prison chaplain.

He was a very capable man who would be very useful anywhere and, as a result, was frequently offered higher employment in the church. Which he as frequently turned down. Exasperated by his stubbornness, his bishop asked him the reason for his obduracy. He replied thoughtfully. 'You probably do not realise', he said, 'how good it is to work with people who have been found out'. That is a less likely tale nowadays, when politicians have introduced harsh mandatory prison sentences, less out of zeal for justice than to endear themselves to the electorate and the press as tough on crime. As a result, prisoners who were once ready to see themselves as justly punished and were ready to serve their time with such resignation as they could muster – humility if there ever was such a thing – are much more likely to be justly resentful at not being treated fairly.

The word 'fair', like Master's word 'grace' to define humility, has aesthetic as well as moral or forensic meaning. So I will conclude by saying something about that. In the essay by Iris Murdoch which I have already quoted she makes the rather gnomic assertion that 'the realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice'. Whatever else that means, it certainly means Rembrandt.

He was realistic certainly, but photographic not. The older he got, the more deeply he got married to his materials. It was that sort of good marriage which lets the partner flourish and be more and more him/her/itself. The softness of the thick reed pen, the fuzzy burr thrown up by the etching needle, the three dimensional plasticity of oil paint producing 'a sleeve so thickly painted one could almost grab hold of it' or so unevenly thinly that it dazzles. Direct rejoicing in his materials, working with them, results in works that gives the beholder the thrill of an access so direct as to be virtually tactile. We are addressed straight on, the human to the human, physical to physical.

Rembrandt's people are there, just there. An early critic and admirer of his work records that Rembrandt 'spent the autumn of

his days among ordinary people'; a later one speaks of his 'uncompromising exaltations of the humble'. His human beings are real presences. They confront you with an unparalleled directness. His unsparing examination was never generalised, and so revealed with equal precision the unique individual. This held even when the subject came from the Bible or classical legend. Here he had a particular interest in the women, and among them those who suffered the outrages of men: Lucretia, Bathsheba and Susannah. He painted all of them more than once, bringing them into the light from the haze of legend. With Bathsheba and Susannah it is impossible to tell exactly how many times he painted them, and this for a very interesting reason. Rembrandt deliberately deprived himself and us of the conventional narrative and iconographical clues by which we might identify them, taking that trivial achievement as sufficiently definitive. In spite of that, writers wrangle away about whether the woman in a linen shift standing in a dark pool of water is Bathsheba or Susannah (the rich cloak behind her indicates status) or none of the above. We have to have a try. But this is not a problem to be expertly solved. It is a fundamental human mystery, such as we can never solve because we are included in the data. In obstinate fact she is, like all of us, just herself: mysterious to herself, surprised by her own reflection in the still water, as she is to us. She wonders. And it is up to us to humble ourselves enough to wonder too, and give her something like the sympathetic attention given her by her painter.

You have a photocopy of Rembrandt's little etching of an old man with a crooked stick, held upside down. Who he was it is completely impossible for us to know. But that knowledge is unnecessary. We can see exactly who he was – and more, is. The one remaining button which holds his jacket together reveals his sagging paunch; his baggy trousers are ragged and a toe shows out of his shoe. And what care, amounting to worship, Rembrandt has given to his fur hat, its texture and volume: as precious to him as it must have been to the poor man. He looks surprised but content

to oblige by posing, conscious of being scrutinised and scrutinising Rembrandt and us back – equal terms. And all the while Rembrandt's needle traces on his little copper plate every fold of the worn clothes and the exact lines of eyes and mouth with a tremulous and masterly obedience. *Exaltavit humiles*. He hath exalted the humble and meek.