



22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C: Ever So Humble

A homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 3: 17-20, 28-29, Ps 67, Hebrews 12: 18-19, 22-24, Luke 14: 1, 7-14

A good friend of mine and a good and godly priest who shall remain nameless – because he is a humble man and would not want any advertisement of his virtue – was once confronted by a particularly belligerent parishioner, a senior professional man with a high self-regard.

The assailant, at the height of his complaint, ironically accused my friend of ‘a lack of humility’.

My friend, who is noted for his dry humour, replied simply, ‘Oh I thought everybody knew that I won the prize for Humility three years running at Seminary.’ Utterly lacking in humour or perception the deflated opponent retired from the fray.

‘HUMILITY’ is of course, one of those things we greatly admire in others but often struggle to manifest ourselves. I speak personally here..... I

find humility difficult not least because, and I wouldn't want to boast, I have a large number of things to be humble about.

Most people, when they think of humility tend to recall that ghastly Dicken's character, Uriah Heep, whose catchphrase 'ever so humble' masked a rapacious greed, utter disloyalty and boundless ambition. It is a false face, a pretence to virtue.

Either that or they see a grovelling self – loathing – 'I am not worthy' – which is starkly at odds with our 'You're Worth It' culture.

In theological terms it was the start of the 'Love your neighbour as yourself' text being translated as FIRST YOU HAVE TO REALLY LOVE YOURSELF. The rest of Jesus' instruction, of course, being largely forgotten. It was all part of that post 1960's retreat from the confessional that produced forests of literature designed to affirm our own worth and self-righteousness. Mother Teresa, once in New York, saw a copy of this literary apogee of self- love, a volume entitled 'I'm OK, You're OK'. She picked it up and said simply,

'I'm not OK . You're not OK. That's why we need Jesus'.

Ironically the further we have drifted away from our consciousness of sin and our own shortcomings and the more we have insisted on our self-love, self -approbation and self -worth, the unhappier, as a culture, we have become. Strange that.

Of course we do not want to return to a culture of 'guilt', as the previous regime was caricatured. Guilt as a permanent condition is crippling.

Guilt is, however, most invaluable as an indicator and a provocation to do something about the wrongdoing that has engendered this profound discomfort in the soul.

But equally, ‘self-love’ as a permanent condition is very destructive. SELF love, as the term implies, is utterly dependent on the self. It is fantastically upbeat in the good times and unrealistically uncritical while, in the bad times it becomes a source of unrelievable misery and despair.

In short, it sentences the victim to a sort of ‘boom-slump’ world of manic depression.

As followers of Christ, the Liberator, we are not interested in either of these demonic extremes. We are interested only in the Truth. This means simply engaging with reality.

The equation for ‘happiness’, or ‘blessedness’ as the old translation of the Beatitudes more felicitously puts it, is fulfilled only in the complete saying of Jesus, to wit...

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength..... And your neighbour as yourself’

The Love that sets us free is not self- love but the knowledge that others love us. Without that we tacitly and unconsciously assume that we are unlovely, unloved and unlovable. But, even if we have the love of others, we have no certainty of that love’s durability or its unfailing fidelity. The only surety we have of longevity and ultimate reliability is in the love of the Eternal One, the God who made us, loves us and seeks our salvation and our company in eternity. The love of others is a truly lovely thing but it finds its apogee and its meaning only in the love of God.

Which brings us back to the presenting case for ‘humility’.

Humility, which draws its origin from the Latin word for ‘earth’ is, first and foremost, a recognition of the supervening reality of our existence. ‘We

are mortal, formed of the earth and unto earth shall we return', as the great Orthodox hymn for the Departed has it. We never forget who and what we are. The Kontakion continues, 'For so you did ordain when you created me saying, 'Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.'

We are sons of Adam, brief walkers upon this earth, creatures of clay and with no futurity of our own making. BUT.....because of the Incarnation and Sacrifice of Christ, the Son of God, we know ourselves to be truly and eternally loved by the One whose love is eternally secure and unfailing. This knowledge is both uplifting and truly humbling and a blessing that we could not have looked for.

Born of the Earth we are bound for Heaven.

Born in Time we are to live in Eternity.

Born of Man we are reborn of God Himself.

If this doesn't make us humble then nothing will.

Humility, then, is the hidden portal to ultimate reality.

As our first Pope, St Peter reminds us:

'Clothe yourselves therefore, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you. Cast all your cares upon him, because he cares for you.'

Amen and Amen.