

Humility (Philippians 2. 1-13)

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'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete; be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others'. (Phil. 2. 1-4).

Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, called our passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians 'a little compendium of Pauline testimony' and 'the heart of the Pauline ethic'.¹ I think it is the key to fullness of life and the possibility of authentic community. It may also, I think, be liable to distortion and misuse as a weapon of spiritual and ecclesial control. Which means we might need to have a closer look at some of the central terms and their meaning – and I'm going to start with the notion of 'humility'.

Humility is perhaps the most misunderstood of all spiritual dispositions. In the ancient world, it was considered a characteristic of slaves and not a virtue at all. In Aristotle's ethics the truly virtuous man was *megalopsychos*, 'great souled', and his virtue involved being able to show just the right degree of magnanimity and condescension to his inferiors – neither too harsh or overbearing (since that suggested a degree of rivalry with his inferiors which was unbecoming), nor too egalitarian and easy (since that suggested insufficient regard for his own honour). In

¹ Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians & Philemon*, Sacra Pagina Series Vol.10, ed. Daniel J. Harrington SJ (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2005), p.76.

the Greek cultural world of Philippi, dominated by an ethic of honour and shame, we shouldn't underestimate how radical it must have been for Paul to preach humility to those who were Roman citizens, to suggest this as the basis for healthy community.

On the other hand, in later Christian circles, the virtue of humility and exhortations to self-abasement came to be entangled at times with a perverse kind of spiritual pride – from the 'willed self-immolation' of hairshirts and self-flagellation, to ritual practices of humiliation in some monastic communities, to a pious and self-conscious false modesty which turns humility into a kind of lying. Furthermore, as feminist critics and liberation theologians have pointed out, exhorting those who are systematically oppressed to 'regard others as better than yourselves' and to 'look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others', has tended to reinforce dominant social hierarchies rather than bring in the freedom of the Spirit, and seems conducive neither to fullness of life nor authentic community. So how are we rightly to understand humility and its centrality for the gospel?

Paul conceives of humility through his knowledge and experience of Jesus, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself ... and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross'. Two things strike me about this. First, Christ's humility does not involve denying who he is. Scholar Bonnie Thurston says, 'Christ did not "give himself away", without first possessing himself ... [H]e *knew* his identity, *knew* who he was'.² Humility means a true and unpretentious vision of oneself, and it is this which enables us to see other things as they really are. Second, Christ's humility involves somehow *choosing* to be 'made low'. The mighty gives up the throne in order to serve (think of Jesus washing the disciples' feet in John's gospel). This is not about forced obsequiousness, but voluntary and chosen relinquishing of status and self-protection in order to be alongside others, for love's sake.

² Thurston, *Philippians & Philemon*, p.91.

In my own life, I have found the image of the ‘ground’ enormously fruitful for learning how to dwell in this space. And this is not really surprising since the word for humility, in English, is connected to the root for ‘humus’, so earth or ground. As I experience it, humility is about coming to rest in or on the ground of my life – both knowing and owning who I am, *and* giving up the effort to be someone else or to grasp at a status I think I should attain. For me, it has a felt sense of being ‘on the ground’ – sometimes connected to having been laid low by some crisis or failure and with no energy to pull myself up by my spiritual bootstraps, sometimes connected to coming to rest in prayer. But always, in the end, a relief and a sense of nowhere left to fall. *And* always, in the end, a sense of being more deeply connected and more capable of love – for other people and rest of creation. Because my ground turns out to be a common ground – a place where it is possible to meet others, to let go self-protection and self-consciousness, free to offer my gifts for the sake of the whole.

The paradox is that as we come to this place of self-emptying and groundedness, lowered to the earth, we somehow find ourselves being filled and lifted up. Neil and I are reading our way slowly through Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and we have just got through the first terrace of Purgatory – which is populated, in Dante’s imagination, by those whose sin was pride. Their penance is to carry a heavy load which forces them to look down and so, to grow in humility. Dante walks alongside them and, he says, he experienced his thoughts ‘stripped bare, reduced, bowed low’ and then realises as he moves on, that his tread is becoming lighter and as he moves to the next tier of Purgatory voices are singing ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’.³ It’s an extraordinary image of the central paradox of the spiritual journey – that as we let go the burden of self-making, grasping at or exploiting our equality with God, so we find ourselves being given a life and a sense of abundance we could not have generated for ourselves. The desert fathers spoke of letting go the heavy burden of self-justification and taking up the easy yoke of self-accusation – this needs some unpacking, but I think they are onto the same paradox.

³ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto 12, line 109.

And all this, Paul suggests to the Philippians, is what is needed for there to be a real community of love dwelling in peace, open to being transformed by God working within its members. The extent to which we 'do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit' and 'look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others' is what it means have the 'same mind ... that was in Christ Jesus'. And from the ground of true humility, this is not about being a doormat or letting one person always get their way in a relationship; it is about knowing in our bones the sharedness of our lives and our place in the whole, and looking to the pattern of Christ's life to guide us as we discern the way that leads to fuller life for all.

There could be almost no greater contrast between this as a way of being in community than what we see being fomented in recent days and weeks in Australia. There are those, apparently, who have so little sense of a shared humanity and belonging that they contemplate violent imposition of their political and religious views; and the response from our political leadership has been in a remarkably similar vein – with what appears to be an attempt to create an ever deeper chasm between 'us' and 'them', with no vision for the possibility of leading us into the 'same mind' and the 'same love'.

Often, when all this is deplored, appeal is made to virtues of tolerance or justice or non-discrimination. But, I wonder if humility, properly understood, better describes the spiritual practice that we need, and suggests the contours of the journey we need to take? It is humility that teaches us that ultimately, everything is gift – our lives, our callings, our selves. And it is humility that opens our eyes to the truth of those around us, fragile fellow creatures held in the love of God – all of us needing to be encouraged to let go self-serving and violent ways of being together to grow into authentic community rooted in common ground.

If Paul's invitation to the Philippians to practise and share in Christ's own humility was radically counter-cultural then, it is no less so in our context. Let us then pray – Jesus, lead us in your way.