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Humility (John 13: 1-9, 12-15)

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Thank you Sarah for the invitation to offer a reflection in the Benedictus gathering. That is humbling enough, let alone the fact that I am talking about humility. Since humility is a path to be travelled, however, and we are all on that path together, I am emboldened to speak to my fellow travellers.

I recently attended a book launch for Jane Foulcher's wonderful work: *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition*.¹ Jane is an Anglican Priest in this Diocese and currently teaches theology at St Mark's National Theological Centre. Her work draws upon monastic sources, from the early desert fathers and mothers in fourth century Egypt, up until present day communities. The value of these sources is that they are earthed in practice, from individual spiritual practices to communal monastic life, to monastic communities engaging with their wider contexts. These earthed practices are fitting, since the word 'humility' comes from the Latin *humilis*, meaning low, and is related to *humus*, the soil.²

Drawing from Joan Chittister, Jane points out that humility brings with it a 'proper sense of self' in relation to the world, and is the 'basis for right relationships in life'.³ Humility is of concern for an individual's spiritual journey. More than that, it concerns the wellbeing of our common life: our right relations with the earth, with each other and with God. These cannot be maintained responsibly through arrogance, overconfidence in our own abilities and opinions, or through violence, which assumes a rightness that is so right it is worth killing for. This is the larger context for Jane's study of humility, which I recommend to you.

Having read this book, I will offer some reflections on the theology behind the quest for humility contained in these pages and other writings. What is it about God that makes humility a good thing for us? And how does being in God's presence, in prayer,

¹ Jane Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2015).

² Foulcher, *ibid*, 1.

³ *Ibid*, xix. From: Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992 [repr. 1997]), 61-2.

contemplation and meditation, lead us into humility? In pondering this question, I have discerned three responses, each deriving from a contrast between ourselves and God.

First, what comes through writings on humility is that we learn humility by recognising our sinfulness in relation to God's goodness. The light of God's goodness shows up our darkness. Yet God's goodness is manifests towards us in that we are not destroyed, but rather saved, by God.

I do not warm to this language of sin that is found in the sources. In my early church experiences, too much emphasis was placed on sin and, as a child, I did not find this very edifying. As an adult, though, I recognise what St Paul means when he bemoans that he knows and wills what is right, but cannot do it (Rom 7:18-20). He expresses a basic resistance to doing the good, which I recognise – a kind of curvature whereby I move towards the good and just before I get there, veer off to the side. I also recognise in the confession of the liturgy that I do things I ought not to do and fail to do those things I ought to have done. I have become more aware in recent years of how this plays out in historical, social and political terms, not just in private life. I am implicated in wrongs and neglects.

When we contemplate these things in the presence of God's goodness, we are humbled by our pathetic attempts to be good under my own efforts, and the sheer complexity of being human. If we rely, instead, on God's grace: forgiveness, acceptance, healing and guidance, we are set upon the path of humility and that puts us in right relation with God and others.

The second way that being with God fosters humility is by knowing our smallness in relation to God's greatness. This way of experiencing humility before God is the lesson given to Job. God speaks to Job from the whirlwind: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth...?' As Sarah said in her recent sermons on Job, while we still matter, such a question puts us in our place and teaches us that we are not at the centre of things. The message here is, 'Get over yourself'. The Psalms also speak of humanity as dust, a passing dream, or like grass that quickly fades and dies (eg. Ps 90). Perhaps for the desert monastics, the vastness and the great age of the desert, compared with the smallness and vulnerability of an individual in it, was a symbol of the insignificant human in relation to the greatness of God. Humility comes from this awareness of our finitude and insignificance on the grand scale and we kid ourselves if we think it is otherwise. We come from the dust and to the dust we shall

return. That can lead us into solidarity and compassion with all living things and ground us in the *humus*, the soil.

That we learn humility through recognising both our sinfulness and finitude in relation to God, is no real surprise. What is less common, I think, is the third way of humility: we are humbled in the presence of a humble God. What this means is that, though God is great, and because God is good, God ‘descends’ to us in love, for our salvation. The fourth century theologian Athanasius reflects: ‘In the light of the incarnation, those who desire to identify themselves with this God who comes down must follow the same movement’.⁴

Pondering ourselves in relation to a humble God, we see the ridiculousness of human pride and vanity. God’s humility undercuts the whole foundation of our socially constructed selves in relation to others, our grasping after power, privilege, wealth and status. These measures of our self-worth are insidious and tenacious. They also lead to rivalry and violence rather than the cultivation of ‘selfless receptivity’⁵ that is a hallmark of humility.

When we consider God’s greatness and goodness, we are left with a sense of God way beyond us and above us. In contrast, pondering God’s humility we see God coming towards us, descending to us, becoming one of us, and stooping *below* us to wash our feet. In the reading for tonight, Jesus explicitly states that his act of foot washing is to be an example for us. But it is more than a rule to follow. Jesus’ response to Peter’s protest is: ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part in me’. Humility has to do with our being part of Jesus’ life and being. The humble God honours us and invites us humbly to honour and serve others. ‘...those who desire to identify themselves with this God who comes down must follow the same movement’.

Such humility is not necessarily meekness. When you truly see the equality of all people, the same in sinfulness, in finitude and in honour, why would you not be outraged, as Jesus was, with oppression, injustice or dishonour? Humility, and its concern for right relations, may lead to public protests, political activism or working for reconciliation.

⁴ In Foulcher, 63.

⁵ Foulcher, 71.

Benedictus has five marks, which define its life together: hospitality, silence, discernment, reconciliation and adventure. Humility is not named among them but I think undergirds and in turn is fostered by them. I see it as having a special association with Adventure. In my experience, the path of humility is quite an adventure. I have had to leave things by the roadside, in order to travel more freely and lightly. Things like: my high horse – and its saddle (in case I met another high horse further along); my self-righteous indignation – which I really loved, especially the part about me being completely right and the totally innocent victim of other people's offences. These and other things have been left behind because I came to see that they served my self-interests, and not right relations with God and others.

While humility leads to letting go, shedding and self-emptying, we are also called by Jesus to fullness, life in abundance. How humility fits with fullness and abundance I will talk about next week. Meanwhile, fellow travellers, let us continue our adventure on the path of humility, one that prepares us for Advent. Amen.