

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 8:23 – 9:3

Psalms 27: 1, 4, 13-14

1 Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17

Matthew 4: 12-23

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“How blessed are the poor in spirit: the reign of God is theirs.”

“Blest are the lowly; they shall inherit the land.” If there is a single theme running through all our readings today, it’s the importance of humility.

Much like short skirts and wide ties, *virtues* go in and out of fashion. The virtue of humility is hardly fashionable these days. But you know, it’s usually when a virtue is least popular that it’s most profitable for us to go back and re-examine it. Often we’ll find that it has wisdom to offer us that the world has, for the moment, forgotten.

We still admire humility under certain circumstances. Let me offer a few examples. Years ago, when a newly appointed archbishop spoke to the Women’s Club at my mother’s parish, she came away impressed. She told me, “He spoke to us like an ordinary person. He didn’t seem like a bishop at all!” My mother was impressed by the archbishop’s humility. He didn’t choose to stand on his dignity.

Mary Cassatt, the great American painter, used to speak highly of the other Impressionists, but would never talk about her own work. One day, at an European exhibition, she was speaking to some people who didn’t know who she was. In the course of the conversation, one of the strangers said, “But you’re forgetting a foreign painter that Degas ranks very high.” “Who is that,” Cassatt asked. “Mary Cassatt,” came the reply. “Oh, nonsense!” she exclaimed. As he turned away, the stranger

murmured, “She's just jealous.”

In 1941, Winston Churchill presented the Victoria Cross to Sergeant James Ward, who had climbed out onto the wing of his bomber in flight, to extinguish a fire in an engine. When it came time to receive his decoration, Ward was nervous in the presence of the Prime Minister. Churchill noticed this, and said, “You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence.” “Yes, sir,” Ward managed to reply. “Then you can imagine how humble and awkward I feel in yours,” said Churchill.

A famous story of humility involves Canute, the ninth century English king. Canute got tired of the endless praise heaped on him by his court. They were telling him continually how powerful he was. So Canute ordered his chair to be set on the seashore, where he commanded the waves not to come in and get him wet. The tide came in as usual. The King got drenched. And from that time on, Canute never wore his crown again, but hung it on a statue of the crucified Christ.

All of these stories manage to make humility appear attractive, even noble. They might even inspire in us, for a moment at least, the desire to be humble. But all of these stories have something in common. They involve a king, a bishop, a prime minister and a great artist -- all people who had tremendous talent, tremendous power, or both. We might say, “Oh sure, *they could afford* to be humble.” I think that’s an important point. All of these people had a secure enough sense of their own self-worth that they could be self-effacing.

In fact, this might be one of the reasons that humility has fallen from favor in our society. Human beings used to think of themselves as the pinnacle of creation. They were made in God’s image, and saved by the death and resurrection of God’s own Son. Even the most wretched

people, could be confident enough of their essential human dignity that they could afford to be humble.

Nowadays our culture seems to be telling us that humankind is some kind of cosmic accident -- a puny short-lived race tucked away in an obscure corner of an immense, uncaring universe, in which billions of new galaxies seem to be discovered whenever astronomers take the trouble to look for them. No wonder people today have no taste for humility. They're all desperately scrambling to salvage some shred of self-worth in a universe where the cards seem to be stacked against them. If they can find some dignity, by golly they're going to stand on it, and they aren't going to budge.

But as Christians, we remain convinced that we are children of a loving God. We *are* somebody. We can afford to be humble. Look, for example at what St. Paul tells the Corinthians today. He says, "You know most of you people aren't very bright. You don't come from very good families, and you yourselves don't amount to much in the world." Remember, this is their apostle, their spiritual leader talking. You'd think they'd be crushed, or at least terribly insulted by Paul's remarks. But no, they can afford to humbly accept Paul's words, because, as Paul also says, they are the chosen ones of God who has given them life in Jesus Christ.

So we, like the Corinthians, can afford to be humble. But granting that, and beyond the fact that Scripture tells us to, why should we choose to embrace humility?

G.K. Chesterton, has one reason to suggest. He writes, "Humility is a grand, a stirring thing, the exalting paradox of Christianity, and the sad lack of it in our own time is what really makes us think that life is dull,

instead of marvelous, like a child does.” In other words, God’s world is full of beautiful and fascinating things and people that we can’t appreciate, because we’re too busy posing as worldly sophisticates. In the spring, we’re afraid to pick a bouquet of dandelions, for fear that someone will see us bending over and think we look silly. In the winter we can’t try to catch snowflakes on our tongues for fear of appearing ridiculous. We can be like members of some “in crowd” who have to pretend that any entertainment, no matter how marvelous, is too flawed and dull for their exquisite tastes.

How much more joyful our life would be if we, like children, could appreciate the charm of the little things and ordinary people we encounter every day. Humility allows us to appreciate what we *see*, rather than worry about how we are *seen*. And don’t we owe at least that much to the loving God who gave us this life and this world?

So perhaps we might take a fresh look at the virtue of humility, and even make of it a kind of belated New Year’s resolution. But in the meantime, as Paul says, “Let those who would *boast*, boast in the Lord.”