



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity - September 26, 2021

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

St. Luke 14:11 (NIV)

Two ducks and a frog lived happily together in a farm pond. The best of friends, the three would amuse themselves and play together in their waterhole. When the hot summer days came, however, the pond began to dry up and soon it was evident they would have to move. This was no problem for the ducks, though, who could easily fly to another pond - but the frog was stuck. So, they put their heads together and decided that the two ducks would put the ends of a stick into each of their bills - that the frog could then hang onto with his mouth - as the three flew to another pond. The plan worked well so well, in fact, that as they were flying along, a farmer looked up in admiration and mused:

"Well, isn't that a clever idea! I wonder who thought of it?"

Overhearing the farmer - and forgetting where he was - the frog couldn't help himself and blurted out:

"I...d-i-ddd!!!"



A Charlotte, North Carolina, woman was purported to have set a “world record” while playing a convenience store video game. After standing in front of the video game called “Tapper” for 14 hours and scoring an unprecedented 7,500,000 points on the game, the woman was pleased to see a TV crew arrive to record her efforts for posterity. She continued to play the game while the crew – which had been notified by the woman’s fiancé – prepared to shoot. However, she was appalled to see the video screen suddenly go blank. As it turned out, while setting up their lights, the camera team had accidentally unplugged the video game, thus bringing her bid for 10,000,000 points to an untimely end! Ironically, the effort to publicize the woman’s achievement had become the agent of her ultimate failure.



Now, I’m sure that we’ve all heard the expression:

☞ **“Pride goes before a fall.”**

Nonetheless, how many of us know that this adage is actually a misquoting of a particular verse of Holy Scripture (the King James Version of Proverbs 16:18, to be exact) which reads:

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”

In either case, however, the meaning is very similar – and quite clear:

☞ **People who are overconfident – or too arrogant – are most likely to fail.**

Especially because they have chosen – in the pride and vanity of their broken human nature – to “go it alone” (namely, without God first and foremost in their hearts and in their lives).

President Abraham Lincoln understood this fact only too well, as is most evident in these words of wisdom he delivered to the American people at the height of their tragic Civil War, as part of his 1863 “Proclamation of a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer”:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied, and enriched, and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.”

Indeed:

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”



Interestingly, in verse 11 of today’s Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 14, our Lord Jesus Christ articulates remarkably similar words:

“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Now, even though Jesus imparted these words to a roomful of

Pharisees at a dinner 2,000 years ago, He could just as easily have said them to us today. Furthermore, these timeless words encapsulate one of the most difficult lessons – **if not THE most difficult lesson** – that we will ever be called upon to “mark, learn, and inwardly digest” in our earthly lives. Because we in the Christian Church (that is, those of us who purport to be “Christ-like” – for that is what the adjective “Christian” means, “a little Christ” or “like Christ”) – are called:

- ♥ **first, TO LOVE and to worship Almighty God in all faithfulness; and**
- ♥ **second, TO LOVE and to serve our neighbours in all faithfulness.**

Period.

Please note:

There is no mention of worshipping, or of serving, or of loving “self” here – for a very good reason: because “the world, the flesh, and the devil” does WAY TOO MUCH of that already. And I think we all have a pretty good idea of how THAT will turn out in the end, on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns for a second – and final – time to judge both the “quick and the dead”, as affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed. For, as I mentioned a few lines back, Jesus Himself promised (in verse 11a of today’s Gospel Lesson):

“...all those who exalt themselves WILL be humbled...”



So, how can this possibly come about (that we can faithfully love and worship Almighty God, and faithfully love and serve our neighbours) in our day-to-day lives? Well, the answer is twofold:

- 👍 **through humility; and**
- 👍 **through grace.**

We are taught about humility and grace – and their relationship to each other – in our readings (or “Propers”) appointed for today, “The Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity”. Six weeks ago, the Propers for Trinity 11 also treated the subject of humility, but there we were shown examples of humility TOWARDS GOD, in the self-effacing character of St. Paul, who humbly acknowledges (1 Corinthians 15:9):

“For I am the least of the Apostles and do not even deserve to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

And in the humble prayer of the Publican at the Temple (in the “Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector”; St. Luke 18:13c):

“God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Today, however, we learn the more difficult lesson of humility in our dealings with OUR NEIGHBOURS.

In today’s Epistle Lesson from Ephesians 4:1-6, St. Paul – writing from a prison cell in Rome, no less! –urges His readers (in verses 1a-2) to:

“... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

Lowly in him (or her) self, the true Christian will be meek towards others and will be careful of offending others. Therefore, we are called to be patient and forgiving when someone sins against us – for pride, harshness, and the bearing of a grudge have no place in the true Christian’s character.



Today's Gospel Lesson (St. Luke 14:1-11) continues this theme of humility towards our neighbours. One Sabbath day, some scribes and Pharisees came to a dinner at a chief Pharisee's house, not to repent and to do the will of the Father, no, instead, they came to find a reason to accuse Jesus of some sin (that is, ANY sin) – in this case, Jesus' healing on the Sabbath of a man with "dropsy" or "swelling", what healthcare professionals today would call "edema". It seemed that they were so enmeshed in the "minutiae" of the Law – which stipulated that medical procedures could not be performed on the Sabbath, as they were considered "work" – that these scribes and Pharisees couldn't even answer Jesus' query whether it was lawful to heal a sick person on the Sabbath. Jesus then subtly confirmed their hypocrisy, by pointing out that they wouldn't think twice of pulling their donkey (or, even, their ox) out of a ditch on the Sabbath. As Jesus observed, what truly motivated the Pharisees, who were constantly on the lookout for:

- 👉 **human respect;**
- 👉 **human attention; and**
- 👉 **human approval,**

was the respect of other Pharisees. Like children, the Pharisees were constantly jockeying for position in society's eyes, saying in effect:

👉 *"Look at me! I'm sitting at the head of the table."*

And that (as Jesus sternly warned in verse 11a) was the kind of hubris that not only will never bring real satisfaction, but, more importantly, will ultimately end in a fall:

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled..."



Even so, before we start feeling a bit too “chuffed up” about ourselves, I feel compelled to ask at this point:

🕯️ With what mindset (and “heartset”) do we come to Jesus and to His “Banquet of Life”, which Christ Himself – with wounded hands – celebrates for, and serves to, us during The Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion?

While we are mulling this eternal question over, please allow me to present these two cases in point.

Case #1:

At a counselling session with her priest to speak with him regarding a most troubling sin, a concerned young woman said:

“Father, I have become aware of a disconcerting sin in my life which I cannot control. Every time I am at church, I look around at the other women, and I realize that I am the prettiest one in the whole congregation. None of the others can compare with my beauty. What can I do about this grievous sin?”

With a deadpan look on his face, the priest replied:

“Mary, the fact that you’re mistaken is not a sin!”

(To least the least, the anonymous writer of this story was “bang on” when he – or she – astutely commented:

“Pride is the only disease that makes everyone sick – except the one who has it.”)



Case #2:

The famous inventor, Samuel Morse, was once asked whether he ever encountered situations in which he didn't know what to do. Without hesitation, Morse responded:

"More than once. And whenever I could not see my way clearly, I knelt down and prayed to God for light and understanding."

Similarly, Samuel Morse received many honours from his invention of the telegraph, but felt undeserving, as evidenced by this "confession":

"I have made a valuable application of electricity, not because I was superior to other men, but solely because God, who meant it for mankind, must reveal it to someone, and He was pleased to reveal it to me."



So again, I ask:

☪ With what mindset (and "heartset") do we come to Jesus and to His "Banquet of Life", which Christ Himself - with wounded hands - celebrates for, and serves to, us during The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion?

Perhaps the following words from Charles H. Spurgeon, a 19th century British Baptist and gifted preacher, might help us in this regard:

"Be not proud of race, face, place, or grace."

Interestingly, St. Paul's use of the word "grace" reveals to us how it is directly related to "humility", as described in today's Epistle and Gospel Lessons, when he writes (2 Corinthians 8:9):

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

We know how great a favour and kindness Jesus did for us in humbling Himself – by becoming human and living among us in the flesh in order to reveal to us two things:

- † what God was really like; and**
- † exactly how – in all humility and selflessness – we are called to love and serve one another.**

Yet, mostly, Jesus, God’s only Son, humbly came to earth to suffer the most humiliating, painful, and undeserved death, by being stapled to a tree, in the form of a wooden Roman cross, so that we – through faith in Him alone – might be saved from the penalty of eternal death for our sins. Consequently, if we are truly sincere in our desire:

- 👉 to follow the example of our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ, by humbling ourselves before others; and**
- 👉 to do “good works” with all lowliness and meekness,**

we NEED the grace of God working within us.

Hence, today, when our Propers emphasize humility and good works towards others, we earnestly pray in today’s Collect for God’s grace both to PREVENT (that is, to go before) and to follow us. Or, to put it another way, we pray for the grace of God to SURROUND US.

For we need God’s grace behind us:

- 👉 to urge us on that we may not fall behind;**
- 👉 to support us when we fail;**
- 👉 to guard us from unseen enemies; and**
- 👉 to bless our works with good results.**

Likewise, we need God's grace to "prevent" (or go before) us:

- ♥ to prompt us with right desires;
- ♥ to guide us that we may be able to complete what we begin;
and
- ♥ to give us opportunity to say and to do good for all others.

Accordingly, from this day forward, even for the rest of our earthly lives, let us – with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ working within and without (that is to say, surrounding) us – remember that:

- ☞ **"Intoxicated with unbroken success we (will) become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, (and) too proud to pray to the God that made us."**
- ☞ **"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."**

All because:

- ☠ **"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."**

True enough with frogs...

Even moreso with human beings.

(Whether they play video games or not.)



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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