

SERMON FOR THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY | 23.10.2022

Ecclesiasticus 35: 12-17; 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18; St Luke 18: 9-14

So what does humility look like?

This has been another tumultuous week politically – and even away in Valencia and Barcelona where I was lucky enough to be able to take a few days away carrying Maria’s bags for her Medical Physics Conference, I was still able to tune in to the radio to follow the ups and downs of a Prime Minister whose abilities, it seems generally agreed, were not as advanced as her ambition.

Last Sunday morning I went in search of St George’s Anglican Church in Barcelona and when I arrived it was nowhere to be seen. The spot indicated by my GPS simply indicated a block of flats. I later discovered that St George’s had been built fifty years ago in Franco’s Spain and no non-Roman Catholic Church was to look like a Church. But following the small sign down a narrow path, through the well tended garden, and there it all was, stained glass and concrete, a thriving international community at prayer. But in 1975 there was to be no generosity of spirit, no humility, just raw power.

We generally rather like humility in others. Of course I don’t mean the Uriah Heap sort, the wringing hands and the obsequious disposition: but we admire people who are not pushy and who genuinely stand to one side when there is no reason for them to take the lime-light. Except that we also like those who are larger than life, who make us laugh and fill the room with fun – those who do the work for us in social situations – which is very much the dilemma that we are finding with Boris Johnson who does all those things and may well end being some kind of king-maker in the current political re-shuffle. No one could possibly accuse him of undue humility – but his popularity doesn’t seem to be much affected!

So what does humility look like?

For example, can rich people be humble; can those with massive influence in their particular field of expertise like doctors or lawyers; can those with a large physical frame be humble or those who seem to have had a silver spoon in their mouth from birth, the people for whom life always seems so easy?

Jesus' insights in this Gospel parable are pitched to answer just that very question. And Jesus is far from saying that all Pharisees are inherently far from God – any more than tax collectors are somehow barred from a relationship with our Heavenly Father. We must assume that both were up to their respective jobs. How we handle the situations in which we find ourselves is often largely a matter of luck and our ability to make the best of what we have.

What Jesus points out to us is the motivation that lies behind success. For the Pharisee everything depended on him and, in particular, his self discipline in observing the letter of the Mosaic Law. But he could not resist the temptation to go on to compare himself with the tax collector others whom he considered to be much less rigorous. *Thank God I am like I am and not like the corrupt goon in the corner...*

And that is the failing: the need to make judgements about others without really knowing their circumstances. Sadly, it is a universal failing. The root of arrogance and the absence of humility is the idea that we know best – and are best, or at least better. We can hear the familiar strain: *thank goodness I am not like him, not like them.* And we justify so much of what we do and think based on our own assumptions, believing that these attitudes will be rubber stamped by God.

But the hated tax collector has no such pretensions. He doesn't feel able to claim anything. He knows he is contingent, wholly dependent on God and he leaves it to God to make the decisions about how worthy or righteous he is – or isn't. The first reading from Ecclesiasticus sums it all up beautifully: don't try to second guess God, don't dress up your generosity to make it look bigger, don't think he doesn't know you better than you know yourself. He is a just judge.

As we baptise Anneke Pol and invite her to make her First Communion today, what we are doing is to offer her a new relationship with the most humble of men, with a Jesus who knew his limitations as well as his God-given birth right. He knew he could never help everyone – heal everyone, convert everyone. Apart from a moment or two at his Baptism and at his Transfiguration when the heavens parted and his real status was revealed to all and sundry, he simply took what he had been given and made the most of it.

In front of Pilate he had nothing to say; under the hammer on the cross he didn't complain; with the know-alls he had some smart ripostes but in general he let them wallow in their own ignorance.

But to the loving, the poor, the open-hearted and the eager enquirer he was all empathy and encouragement, holding nothing back and sharing everything - to the point of being able to say to the penitent thief: *today you will be with me in paradise.*

This is the one we, with Anneke, are naturally drawn to. It is what humility looks like. It is the stuff which says, *I can't justify myself, I can't make myself good. I know nothing more than to put my trust in the one who not only knows me and loves me, but who knows and loves me as I am.*

Why fight on for myself when Jesus has already won the battle?

Interestingly, as we have seen this week, people who are arrogant and endlessly self-justifying are also very unsatisfactory leaders.