



Sunday 8 March

LENT AND HUMILITY

**The Reverend
Jo Winn-Smith**



**GUILDFORD
CATHEDRAL**

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Humility. I wonder what it means to you, or what image it conjures up in your mind when you hear it?

Perhaps after years of BBC costume dramas, it's Uriah Heep, grovelling and wringing his hands and mumbling about his faux humility. Or perhaps you have even read the original!

Today it tends not to be espoused as virtue, though of course it didn't take much googling to find Donald Trump proclaiming the vast amounts of humility he personally possesses!

But what does it really mean?

Humility comes from the Latin hummus, literally 'earth'. Being humble means recognising that we are simple clay. As the funeral liturgy reminds us, 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' – we are predominantly carbon, and we are made the same as the earth, and to it we return. In the creation story in Genesis, we miss out on the play on words in the naming of humanity, and in the specific name of Adam.

In the Hebrew, earth is 'adamah', and the first person created is the human, Adam. A more helpful translation, now that fewer of us know Latin, would be to call ourselves earthlings, and to call Adam, Dusty. It might be a helpful reminder of our nature, and a call to humility and self-awareness.

But although we are made of dust, there is one extra component of which we comprise – Spirit. God breathes into the earthling, and that breath of life, is the spirit which enlivens us. There is something of God's desire for us to live, and something of God's divine intention for us and our potential in how we might live, that comes in our creation. Although we are made of simple earth, and are predominantly carbon, we also have God's grace at work within us. That is something not to lose sight of as we reflect upon the notion of humility.

And so, when it comes to considering Lent and humility, perhaps the best place to start, as always, is with the words of Jesus. In Matthew 6, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends giving alms, praying and fasting, as all things which should be done without showiness or particularly in public to draw attention.

These are all practices which traditionally are advocated to be undertaken, or undertaken more, during Lent. We're not meant to advertise that we've given up chocolate or alcohol, or that we're having no or a simpler lunch. The more ancient traditions of giving up meat, or just generally more luxurious foods – and hence the need for pancakes on Shrove Tuesday – were so embedded into society, that it simply became a common practice, and so I wonder where and how the spiritual benefit was always received.

Because that has to be the point, with any practice of abstemiousness. It might do us some limited physical good, but that is not the purpose of doing it during the season of Lent. The very purpose is to draw our time and attention away from ourselves, from our own personal gain and pleasure, or even spoiling, and to use the reminder arising from the deprivation as a prompt for reflection on the cross of Christ.

And that reflection goes further than simply remember that that was how Christ died. Its fundamental purpose is to make us aware of our greatest need, and aware of our most fundamental lacking, and that is in the ability to save ourselves, that our sins are manifold, and that we are utterly reliant on the grace of God.

And I think this then begins to tie in with Jesus consequent direction, which is one that points us back to the story of creation. Jesus says, in Matthew 6, that when we fast, as well as not drawing attention to it, we are, in fact, to do the opposite. The text says,

‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

I rather like how the Message version of the bible expresses it:

When you practice some appetite-denying discipline to better concentrate on God, don't make a production out of it. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity but it won't make you a saint. If you 'go into training' inwardly, act normal outwardly. Shampoo and comb your hair, brush your teeth, wash your face. God doesn't require attention-getting devices. He won't overlook what you are doing; he'll reward you well.

What Jesus seems to be saying here, is not simply don't make a song and dance out of it, not simply be humble and not draw attention to it, but rather to live your life normally, but also that living your life normally involves being grateful and joyful, positive and with a genuine smile on your face.

And I think, in some ways, that brings us back to how we're told that we are dust but enlivened by the Spirit. The basic, humble attitude to which humans are called to act, is one that recognises the gracious spirit of God at work in us, and the life within in us that God gives. And that basic demeanour and attitude, that approach to living and the kind of behaviour that exemplifies it, is one of gentle joy, of walking gently on this earth with awe and happiness, gratitude and a smile.

Now of course there are always times when we will rightfully be sad. And we know that our God is compassionate, that Jesus wept with those who sorrowed, and yet also we know that we have the resurrection hope, and that ideally all funerals are a mix of tears with hope.

But our fundamental demeanour on this earth, I suspect, is meant to be one of simplicity and joy, and that is actually what being humble involves. It recognises our basic dustiness, whilst alongside that is grateful for the gift of grace which includes our very living. For joy is not fake happiness, or always having a smile plastered over our faces. But rather joy is a basic state of contentment with the world

and appreciation for God as initiator, creator, provider, and friend.

Now there does seem to be a slight tension here, though, as we are contemplating humility during Lent. Is not focusing on the cross meant to be a deeply sobering experience, and there is an important need to not rush through and past the cross and to want to only embrace the resurrection, and to have a degree of denial about Christ's suffering to achieve it, and of our own sinfulness and failures, that meant it was required?

How do we hold this tension, when we see that Christ spent his forty days in the desert, praying and being tempted, and that we also have to travel with him along the Via Dolorosa, through Holy Week, to the foot of the cross?

It seems to me that this tension is resolvable because we are facing a matter which is a both/and, not an either/or. Because Christ calls us to pray, give alms, and fast discretely, in private, spending time with God our Father, there is plenty of time for quiet contemplation, away from others and being in public, when we can focus on thinking and reflecting on these important and sobering truths. It is behind closed doors that we can sit quietly with a decent book of Lenten reflections, and contemplate our life, our faith, what God has done in Christ, and how we participate in the family of God and how our lives might be formed and honed to be ever more in his likeness.

And I don't think that fulfilling that humility means we can't talk about it at all. It's okay to discuss these kinds of things calmly and quietly with trusted Christian friends. We don't do it to compete or show off, but rather because within the church family, God gives us each other, and we have different roles to play, as different parts of the body (to use the other metaphor), and as such our different parts and talents, experiences and wisdom, we can use to support one another and offer one another guidance or reassurance, a sounding board or some gentle teaching from experience.

So, turn to your neighbour for a moment, and reflect together on what you have heard. What do you think of the definition of humility as one of simplicity mixed with joy? Or perhaps what Lenten disciplines have you found helpful in the past? Do you think it's possible in modern society to fast without it all becoming about diet culture and our benefit, as opposed to being an opportunity for gratitude and more time for contemplation?

Now I'm going to throw in a curve ball, as I want to spend a little time critiquing the notion of humility, as I think it's been helpful to try to expand it, but I'm also very conscious of its history.

Have you ever noticed how humility is often taken to be the corollary of God's desire to address our pride? That humility is often seen as pride's antidote, and thus that it is, in some ways seen as the antithesis, the opposite of sin?

Pride has often been taken to be the root of all sin. Pride is seen as the attitude and origin of all human evil. This was the approach of Augustine, it's the attitude he attributes to humanity as the stain on our character, ever present, even in babies, who he deems capable and full of the potential to sin, and it has been taken to be the downfall of many a man (I probably use that word advisably!).

But the problem with theology is that just as history is written by the winners, theology has been written by the men in power. And the men in power have tended to write from that perspective, even if they have tried to be, or have even truly been, truly humble. But the thing is, how does that work, if you are, in fact, someone without power or influence?

Too often our preachers, even today, tend to be those who come from places of influence and affluence. We see the glossy, popular charismatic preachers, and we're often impressed by their seeming humility when we hear them speak ever so self-deprecatingly.

But the thing with self-deprecation is that it only works if you have power in the first place. People can smile and laugh if you put yourself down, or laugh gently at yourself, but that only works if you and those listening to you know that you are already in a lofty position, already in a higher place in the community and society, and so putting yourself down is a thing that is possible to do. Behind self-deprecation lies an assumption of power, an attempt at relatability, which may, or may not, be authentic. Where it is genuine, that is awesome, and I'm certainly (and hopefully obviously) not saying ignore all male theologians or priests (!), but perhaps we just need to just be a little alert to contexts in which only one type of person ever speaks (particularly if they're white and male), as no matter how humble they may be, if only one type of person is deemed to be capable of holding authority, or of teaching or sharing of their knowledge and experience of God in an authoritative manner (as opposed to being set up as someone who has been massively in need of redemption, and therefore fulfilling the category of great sinner who has been transformed), then something most likely not of God's vision for humanity is going on.

Because what I want to draw your attention to, is the critique of traditional or conventional tellings of the nature of sin, which first emerged in liberation theology, which actually harks back to the theology of the Exodus and is very much present in the New Testament, if we just have eyes to see it. It is expressed pretty succinctly in its feminist version by the writer Valerie Saiving Goldstein, back in 1960. She says the tendency has been to equate sin with:

'Pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons'

But if we just pause for a moment, we have to recognise that that is a very narrow definition of sin. By seeing sin as the contemporary evangelist might say as 'having "I" in the middle', as being about selfish self-promotion, that makes a considerable assumption that the individual has the power in the first place to misplace in their assertion. What about the slave, what about those with disabilities, or even, as has historically been the case, and is still subtly in so many ways today, women? She goes on to say that it is 'negation of the self', which is the risk of those who are made to be sub-servient in society, those who enable its structures and underpin its conveniences. Those who fall for the lie that they are unworthy, lack value, their sin, or perhaps failure, is to value themselves.

And so it seems to me, that when Christ teaches us to love our neighbour as ourselves, perhaps behind that direction, is not simply a call to love our neighbour, and not to focus on or overly assert ourselves, but that for some the call is to value ourselves, to not forever put others before ourselves and to diminish ourselves to the point that we disappear.

Now I swiftly want to explain that I do not think that is incompatible with the call to humility, or the even more powerful and challenging one of 'dying to self' and of following in Christ's way of sacrificial life. That is for two reasons.

The first is that only Christ fulfils the perfect once-and-for-all sacrifice. We can never hope to fulfil that role. Yes, tragically some will be martyred or risk their own lives in order to save others, as Christ himself says, 'no one has greater love that they might die for their friends', but the ultimate and only sacrifice for the salvation of humanity was completed and undergone by Christ, and so we imitate his ways of loving, but we cannot fulfil that task.

Secondly, we remain precious to God. No one has the right to tell you, you must sacrifice yourself. That is equivalent to the old man who is happy for other people's children to go to die in wars of his own instigation and which will never do him any harm. We can commend the way of Christ, but that is not the same. However, the key thing is, and we know that Christ ever points us to look at our selves, our own hypocrisy, the beams in our eyes, rather than the specks in others, and we face the

daily choice of whether we choose to give of ourselves. And that is something we can only do when we know what our value is. Humility, perhaps, when we think about the choice to be self-giving and self-denying, is knowing how we are both two-a-penny but also absolutely precious and beloved of God. Humility is that dusty earthy simplicity, but by God's grace, filled with his breath of life, his spirit.

And so, when we focus on humility during this season of Lent, it is ultimately about reminding ourselves to recognise the grace at God in our lives, and how that played out in Jesus' journey to the cross. We simplify our lives, let go of some luxuries, or are self-denying in order to free up the time and space in our lives to remind ourselves of our utter reliance on him for both this life, and eternal life.

Humility is a gift of knowing the truth of who we are – precious but ordinary, simple dust but enlivened by the Spirit. It is a midpoint, that challenges both pride, which ignores our failings and cares not for others, but also self-denigration, which hates what God has made and called good.

As we come to the end of this Lent reflection, turn to your neighbour and share how you feel about this definition of humility, and about the liberation theology notion that we can undervalue, as much as overvalue ourselves. Do you think pride remains the best definition for sin, or would you widen or change your definition?

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