

### *Inside Out*

In the name of him who suffered in disgrace outside the gate in order to sanctify us through his own blood, dear friends in Christ: the common theme in today's Gospel and Old Testament lessons is that they both direct us to seek the virtue of Christian humility. And that's a noble goal. An appropriate level of humility is something that we should all be striving to make an important part of our redeemed and renewed spiritual character. We should be known as humble people rather than as the kind who constantly are seeking honor and glory for themselves. But whenever the topic humility comes up I can't help but think of that silly old song about how hard it is to be humble. You remember it, I'm sure: "O Lord it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way; I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cause I get better lookin' each day." We could probably all sing it together—*but* let's not.

The song is a joke, of course – a pretty funny one at that. Still, there's an element of truth in it: it really is hard to be humble. Not because we're perfect though; quite the opposite: we are imperfect. And our most notable imperfection is usually pride – the opposite of humility. The sin nature in each of us is turned inward on itself with the result that we are self-centered and self-focused. We naturally think of ourselves first and as being more important and more special than anyone else. *Me and my* concerns are what matters. And the funny thing is that it becomes apparent on both ends of the spectrum. On one end you've got the glory seeking braggarts who are overly full of themselves and everyone knows it (and for that reason can't stand them). And on the other end you have the wall-flower types who seem to be possessed by a sense of self-loathing: "I'm no good, I'm not attractive, I can't do anything right". This is what they say—but in fact it's another manifestation of prideful self-centeredness because what they're really saying is "Life isn't treating me fair and I deserve much better." It appears to be humility; but it's still really all about *me*. In between these two poles of overt behavior you have the rest of people (perhaps the rest of us) who have learned through experience to suppress our natural urges either to brag aloud about our achievements and personal qualities or to invite others to join us in our perpetual pity parties – even though deep down we'd really like to. But we have learned to hide these inclinations. We dare not act on them. And we refrain precisely so that others will think that we are less self-centered and more humble than we really are. But it's an act. It's done for appearance's sake: because I'm concerned about what you will think of me – and I want you to think well of me – specifically I want you to think that I'm a humble person. See how humble I am? It doesn't work, does it? Whatever humility we achieve by consciously trying to act in ways that appear to be humble is counterfeit.

The genuine thing is a far more elusive quality. True humility is a goal that if you pursue, you'll never know if you've attained it; for the moment you find yourself thinking that you have, you've lost it. I've said it before but it's true: a genuinely humble person would be the last person to know it. That's because he wouldn't be thinking about himself. A truly humble person wouldn't consider himself something worthy of thinking about—*that's* what makes him humble.

So, still recognizing that achieving genuine Christian humility in ourselves is a worthy goal, the question becomes how can we strive attain a quality that so easily escapes our grasp and that we wouldn't be aware if we had it? The answer lies in changing the direction of our focus. Humility cannot be pursued by looking within and considering the self because that's what pride is all about – and that's the opposite of humility. So, to find humility—or rather not find it per se but to live it without seeing it, we need to turn ourselves inside out, so to speak, so that the attention we normally give to ourselves is directed outward toward others.

And that brings me to today's Epistle lesson in which writer of Hebrews gives us a rather lengthy exhortation about living as Christians. Some of you may be aware that many Bible scholars believe that what we have in Hebrews is in fact an example of a first century sermon rather than an epistle like the ones Paul sent to the congregations he had established at say Corinth or Ephesus. That is to say the author of Hebrews (and we're not sure exactly who he was) actually preached it in its entirety to his congregation one fine Sunday morning. And if that's true, I think it's rather amusing that whoever the author was would have got a failing grade for it had he preached it in a homiletics course at one of our seminaries. He would have flunked for three reasons. First because it's too long. Today's pastors are told to keep their sermons relatively short because modern people simply don't have the attention spans that our ancient forebears did. Second, he would have failed because the sermon is far too technical and contains too many references to the Old Testament. He'd be told, "You'll only confuse people. Keep it simple." And here I thought modern man was

supposed to be getting so much smarter and sophisticated. But what really would have killed this sermon is that it ends with a heavy law section. Seminary students are told to do law first – that is, to convict people of their sins; and then to present the Gospel – that is, direct people to Jesus and his sacrificial death on the cross where the atonement for sins was made. After that you're supposed to say "Amen" and sit down. You want people to leave the church thinking about Jesus and his saving work, not with a long list of things that *they* are supposed to do or not to do.

But the preacher of Hebrews turns that around. After going on for pretty much the whole sermon about the superiority of Jesus and the new covenant of grace that comes by his death on the cross as compared to the old covenant which involved all those repeated animal sacrifices, he builds up in chapter twelve to this magnificent crescendo of Gospel. He says, "You've not come to scary Mount Sinai, with its smoke and flames and all the people trembling in terror before a God of wrath. No, no, you've come to Mount Zion, to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to the saints and angels all worshipping together, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to his sprinkled blood that pleads for mercy and for our forgiveness before the throne of God."

Wonderful. According to the sermon textbook, that's where he should have called it quits. But the inspired preacher of Hebrews does not. He keeps on going with the section that we heard this morning. And what he says is, "In view of all that Jesus Christ has achieved for us, let's be grateful for the unshakable inheritance that we've been given through faith in him and offer our acceptable worship to God."

What is that worship? Well certainly it includes what we're doing now and what typically goes on in here on Sunday mornings: the hymns of praise and prayers of thanksgiving and so on, because he does mention them eventually; but that is not where he begins. Instead he would have us understand that our proper worship of the Lord involves the whole conduct of our transformed lives. And what I want you to see is that what he's doing is moving our focus off ourselves to others.

He begins by calling us to display brotherly love, thereby echoing the command of Jesus to his disciples: "Love one another as I have loved you." This is where true humility begins: in setting aside ourselves, our needs, our wants, our desires and goals, and seeking instead the greater good of others. It requires that we get outside of ourselves and try to see the world from their point of view. What are their needs? What can I do to fill them? What burdens are they carrying? How can I lighten the load? What help or encouragement do they need? And how can I provide it? And of course, this involves more than just asking the questions. You actually have to follow through and do whatever it is that's going to be of help – and do it without thinking about the cost or inconvenience to yourself. Brotherly love means giving yourself *sacrificially* for the benefit of other members of the body of Christ.

And while he's got us thinking of doing good for the people around us, he raises the stakes by telling us to consider also the *strangers* with whom we have contact. Show them hospitality, we heard – which is a rather weak translation of what he actually wrote. The word for brotherly love is *philadelphos*, from which we get Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love". What's translated "hospitality" is the word *philoxenos*, which is "love for strangers. So it's not just: be nice to them; greet them at the door, shake their hands, and tell them how happy you are to meet them sort of thing. No, it's: *love* them. It means once again placing yourself in their shoes and receiving and caring for them as you yourself might hope to be received if you were a stranger.

And then after telling us to love the strangers we come across he takes us still farther outside ourselves to those who are usually beyond the limited scope of our sight: to prisoners in jail and to those who are suffering in hospitals, nursing homes, mental institutions, or perhaps just in the wretched squalor of their poverty. With such people it's easier and certainly more comfortable for us to think "out of sight, out of mind". "Remember them", he says – and again, that's not just *think* about them from time to time; it's do what you can to relieve their misery. We have here the call to compassion: to feel what they feel as if we were in their bodies and to suffer with them in their distress. And here too we remember the words of Jesus who locates himself in all human suffering when he says to the redeemed, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was naked and you clothed me; sick and in prison and you visited me ... When you did [these things] for the least ... you did [them] for me."

Next the preacher of Hebrews does a changeup. After taking us about as far outside of ourselves as we can get, he brings us back to the person who is likely to be closest: to your own spouse. “Hold the estate of marriage in the highest honor”, he says. For those who are married it means giving yourself for the good of your spouse. For men it means taking the lead and loving your wife as Christ loved his bride the Church, sacrificing himself completely for her. For women it means surrendering your will to your husband and gladly submitting to him just as the Church submits to Christ. For those who are not married it means remaining chaste and celibate. And for everyone it means upholding the sanctity of marriage by supporting those who are in it and encouraging them to fulfill their vows, it means suppressing improper lusts and passions and striving to lead a life free of sexual sin, and it also means rebuking those who through their words or behavior treat holy marriage and sexual purity with contempt.

Then, continuing to move the focus of our attention closer to home, at last the preacher takes you inside yourself – not to look for what’s good and worthy in here; but rather to reveal and root out what’s not. And specifically, you are to target for destruction what would prevent you from being as helpful and loving as you might otherwise be toward others. Namely covetousness, the love of money, and the joint sins of discontent with what God has provided you and the fear that tomorrow he’s going to cut you off and leave you without the basic necessities of life. It’s simply not possible to show love for others and be generous with the blessings God has given you if you are focused on accumulating more for yourself because you’re terrified that one day you might not have enough. You needn’t worry about such things: The Lord has promised you both his presence and his gracious care. Always.

And as examples of this the preacher of Hebrews holds up before his hearers the leaders of the Church who first proclaimed the Gospel to them – presumably people like Paul and the other Apostles who carried the message of Jesus throughout the Roman world. Remember how they went out with nothing more than the Word of God – and how the Lord took care of them wherever they went. Remember too, he says, their “going out” or “departure” from this life. I expect he means how they either died as martyrs confidently confessing their faith in Jesus, or perhaps how they died peacefully in the knowledge that for the Christian death is but the passage to a better life. Either way, he directs his hearers once more to get outside of themselves and to think of these selfless people who suffered so much to bring them the Word of God. Try to imitate their faith, he says.

Both its pure content: he warns them not to be led astray by strange and useless teachings; and also its practice: that is, the “inside out” life of sacrificial service for others he’s been talking about. And for his example of this he reminds us once more of the Lord Jesus himself when he suffered for us outside the gates of Jerusalem in what was then the city dump. This is where we see true humility: in the Lord Jesus on the cross, cast out and despised – the One to whom legitimately belongs all honor and glory enduring instead untold pain, shame, and abuse as he gives himself completely for us, his sinful creatures. There Jesus literally went outside of himself for us – emptying himself for us of what was inside him: his precious blood and his Holy Spirit. There’s nothing more or greater that he could possibly have given.

And he did it for you. And I need to tell you, if pondering that truth that doesn’t humble you, nothing will. But I expect it does. When you honestly compare your prideful, self-serving thoughts and actions to what he freely surrendered for you, you can clearly see just how foolish and monstrously evil are your pathetic efforts to put yourself before others. His death puts all our lives to shame. But ironically that’s a good place for sinners like ourselves to be because that’s where true humility begins. It begins in recognizing just how helpless, hopeless, and addicted to ourselves we are. Then we can see how desperately we need the grace and forgiveness Jesus’ death on the cross accomplished for us. And hopefully we will see also how much we need the soul-strengthening witness of his sacrifice that he’s given us, his Holy Supper, in which we receive to ourselves the very body and blood he gave to redeem us. Then, forgiven and spiritually refreshed and revived, with Jesus Christ actually in us, we can begin to live the “inside out” life of Christian humility and service for others that our Lord desires. We let Jesus in us be seen on the outside of us. And this will be our acceptable worship to him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***