

## **Is Pride a virtue or a vice?**

**Sermon preached at St Peter's church, Nottingham by Rev Christopher Harrison,**

**Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

In today's second reading we hear a parable about a self-righteous Pharisee who was convinced he was in good standing with God. He actually tells God how good he is, being confident of God's approval. Contrary to what he expected, however, it was a publican, or tax collector, who was standing alongside him in the Temple who was seen as righteous in God's eyes, because it was he, not the Pharisee, who recognised how sinful he was and confessed his sinfulness to God, saying, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'.

This evening I would like us to reflect on the meaning of the word 'pride'. When you think of someone as being 'proud', do you see this as a good thing or a bad thing? The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle saw pride as the 'crown of the virtues'. However, he specified that what he meant by this was what he called 'greatness of soul'; he contrasted this with vanity, temperance, and humility. He believed that if someone was genuinely worthy of great things, through their personal qualities or virtues, they had every right to be proud, and that true pride makes a great person more powerful. However, he said that true pride is impossible for someone if they do not have a noble and good character. In recent decades, there has been a new emphasis, amongst those who have sought to understand what makes people fulfilled and satisfied, on pride in oneself. They have shown that those people who have a negative image of themselves quite often do not thrive; they tend to assume they can't succeed, that they are not likeable or lovable, and their self-esteem is low. By contrast, such people argue, it is entirely right for us all to be proud of ourselves, to give ourselves credit for what we have achieved, and not to be unduly humble. Such thinking can be seen as a reaction, at least in part, to those forces in society which, over the years, have tended to give people an undue sense of their own inadequacy, weakness or tendency to fail in life.

Pride, then, according to such ways of thinking, can be good thing. If we agree with such approaches, we are entitled to be proud of ourselves, and indeed it can be bad for us if we are not at least some extent proud of the things we have done.

There is another fairly recent use of the word 'pride' which has arisen as a reaction to prejudice, stigma and intolerance. Asian pride was a term used in some countries as a reaction to European colonialism; Black pride is similar in an African-Caribbean context. Gay Pride has become established as means of striving for greater rights and acceptance for gay people.

For the Christian Church, however, pride has long been seen as one of the seven deadly sins; and, for some Christian writers, pride is no less than the Queen of all vices. What, then, is the reasoning behind this? At the heart of the Christian view that pride is a very serious sin lies that form of pride which leads people to

turn away from God. And indeed what can be more serious than turning one's back on God, if you believe, as Jesus taught (following Moses), that the essence of the Christian life involves loving God with all one's heart and soul, mind and strength, and loving one's neighbour as oneself? Pride, understood in this way, is to do with believing that we don't need God; that we are self-sufficient; that we can supply the answers to all our problems ourselves, and that we don't actually need God at all. Trusting in ourselves for everything; thinking that we can do very well for ourselves, thank you, without God; not looking to God, and his Son Jesus, for guidance as to how we are to live; not recognising the sovereignty of God in our lives: all these are examples of the kind of pride which has traditionally been seen in the Church as the Queen of all the vices. (All the other six deadly – or mortal – sins are to do with putting ourselves before God in some way or another – wrath, greed, sloth, lust, envy, gluttony; but pride is not just about putting ourselves before God, but turning our back upon God altogether).

But I imagine you may have also begun to realise that when we talk of pride as being a good thing, on the one hand, or when we say it is a bad thing, on the other, we're actually using the word pride in two different ways. Aristotle's 'greatness of soul', 'magnanimity', (*megalopsychia*) was a virtue which was very different from the self-centred and superior pride and rejection of God (*superbia*) which the Church has seen as the Queen of the vices. Aristotle was well aware that excessive pride, undeserved pride, an excessive confidence in oneself, was a bad thing – but for this he used a different Greek word, *Hubris* (a word which the Greek tragic dramatists explored and showed how it generally brought very bad consequences for the person who had a hubristic attitude towards God or other people – rather as in the saying 'pride goes before a fall').

In the Christian Church, also, the idea of pride as excessive self-confidence has also been part of the way in which pride has been seen as sinful. While this form of pride doesn't necessarily involve turning one's back totally on God, it does mean that setting oneself up above one's neighbours in a way that is inappropriate, nonetheless still runs counter to God's teaching. (Such as when James and John – or their mother, on their behalf – asked Jesus if they could sit as his right hand in his heavenly kingdom; and when the self-righteous Pharisee, in the parable which we heard in today's second reading, congratulated himself before God saying that he was glad that he was not like the miserable sinner praying beside him; whereas in fact it was the one who, in all humility and penitence, confessed his sins to God, was forgiven, not the Pharisee).

We may not talk so much these days, at least in our Church, about deadly sins, sins which automatically consign us to hell. We tend to see God as more kind, loving and forgiving than this. But all the same, the message of the Church's teaching on sins like pride remains clear. Turning our back on God is a serious matter, even in this age when we are encouraged to affirm the right of people to hold any religious belief or none at all. Setting oneself up over and above other people in ways which are not appropriate fails to recognise that we are all children of God, that it is God alone who is the judge of where we stand in his eyes,

that even the person who may appear to be the most abject and wretched failure in the eyes of the world may be far more spiritual and godly than any of us. It's not for us to say.

There's one other aspect of pride which I also want to mention. This is the ancient teaching, found in the pages of the Old Testament as well as in the associated writings such as Ecclesiasticus, that nations, like individual people, must not set themselves up as superior to those around them, and turn their backs on God's ways. Rulers who are too proud, who neglect God and a due spirit of humility, will find themselves uprooted and replaced by the lowly (think of the words of the Magnificat, which we say or sing at Evensong: "God has scattered the proud in the conceit/imagination of their heart, he has put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek"). The nation of ancient Israel, we read in the Old Testament, was repeatedly punished for turning away from God and trusting in its own leaders and rulers and not God.

What is the relevance of this today? In view of the way in which religion has contributed towards wars, as politicians have used God, as it were, to justify their actions, should we not keep God out of politics altogether? I believe, however, that the ancient Old Testament teaching about nations turning their backs on God is about something rather different, which is indeed still very relevant today. This is that nations should not seek their own interests above all else; that seeking to dominate and exploit other nations is wrong; that the use of force by a nation to get its own way is also wrong; and that in fact – controversially – our unity as a world of individuals, families and communities, under God is perhaps a higher ideal than pride in a mere nation state. This means also that nations should use force only as a last possible resort, and in a way that is proportionate to the aim concerned and not likely to cause negative consequences which outweigh any beneficial results of the initial action.

We've considered pride as turning one's back on God; pride as setting oneself up inappropriately above other people; and false and inflated forms of national pride. All traps into which well meaning individuals and nations can all too easily fall. It has been said that pride is the hardest of all the sins to conquer, even for the most holy of people. After many years, and lots of trials, tribulations and setbacks, we master almost all of the temptations and vices that have repeatedly dragged us down. We sit back, relax, and say to God, 'I've done really well, haven't I, I really deserve to get to heaven thanks to all my hard work ... I'm so proud of myself'. Amen.