

## A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

### Pride

Proper 17C                      1<sup>st</sup> September 2019, Linton

Ecclesiasticus 19.12-18      Luke 14.1, 7-14

What do you think is the worst sin of all? Is it violence and murder? Is it genocide? Is it anger or malice or spite?

No – not according to our biblical and Christian tradition; there's something worse, something deeper, something which might be said to underlie all those horrible sins. There's an old story which depicts it as the sin which made some of God's angels fall; the sin which turned Lucifer, whose name meant 'bearer of light', into Satan, the jealous accuser, eager to see darkness and destruction sown among human beings. The sin I'm talking about is, of course, Pride- the subject of today's two readings.

The sage of Israel who wrote the book of Ecclesiasticus – one of those books we find in the Apocrypha - not

*quite* in the Bible for Protestant Christians, but still enlightening and wise: the author of Ecclesiasticus said this:

*'The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.'* (10.12) There can be nothing more fundamental than that – the heart withdrawing from its Maker, I have heard Pride in this fundamental sense explained as the sin which says to God, 'I don't need you.' Little surprise then that when Jesus describes the life of those who live close to God, he starts by saying *'Blessed are the poor in spirit...'*, rendered in one translation as *'Happy are those who know their need of God...'* To know our need of God – that's the very opposite of Pride.

But why is Pride seen as the most destructive of sins, wrecking not only our relationship with God, but also with our fellow human beings – and indeed, with the whole of Creation?

Let's look at this attitude in human affairs: the person who says, 'I have no need of you' to other people is basically choosing isolation instead of relationship. Of course, very few people cut themselves off *completely* from others and go and live on a desert island. It's

impractical. But spiritually and emotionally people can take the line that they are self-sufficient and don't need others at any deep level, whilst nevertheless – in some cases – getting satisfaction from their admiration or compliance. Pride chooses the bolstering of its ego over real relationship. If you just want people around you because they admire you and agree with you, or satisfy your appetites and obey you; if you just want people for what you can get out of them, or to be the mirror in which you see yourself reflected, then you are behaving as someone who doesn't need *them* as their very selves with their own gifts and diversity, different from you, and perhaps challenging and uncomfortable. If you do, on the other hand, acknowledge your need of others as they truly are, then you understand about community, you know what it is that makes us truly human. I think this is why Ecclesiasticus says: '*Pride was not created for human beings or violent anger for those born of women*'. (10.18)

So, Pride behaves as though a person doesn't need God; it infects relationships with other people because it doesn't understand how necessary for us it is to live in a truly mutual network, and I of course, it's also his wrecking our relationship with the rest of God's good

Creation: 'We don't need you, except in so far as we can exploit you for ourselves', we have been saying for far too long to other species. And now we can see just where that's getting us.

So Pride threatens to destroy us all; many other sins are born of it – the violent anger, spite and malevolence which arise when Pride is crossed; the manipulation of others, and indifference to their true nature; the self-satisfaction which would like to depart from this life singing 'I did it my way' even in the knowledge of the damage we've done, even in the face of the Creator from who no secrets are hidden.

The Gospel passage for today, deals with Pride. It looks on the surface as though Jesus is giving people a lesson in social etiquette – the best way not to let their pride lead to embarrassment, a prudent way in which less pushy behaviour might lead to making a good impression, and getting the reward for that. '*Friend, come up higher...*'. But scratch a bit deeper, and you find that he wasn't just giving good social advice – he was telling a *parable*. The story about the pushy guest and the humble one stands for something bigger than how to behave at dinner parties. It stands for how we

are before God and with other people. And I think it's not just about how we are as individuals, but how we are as communities. Like many of his parables of the kingdom, it's likely that the original sharp meaning of the parable was seen as being a challenge to the religious leaders of Israel, and their assumption that – they and their people would have the first place at the dinner table in the wedding banquet of God's kingdom.

But I think it can also be applicable to the Church, or to a certain Christian frame of mind – 'we can be sure of our place at the top table in the kingdom because of our faith'? Let's remember how Jesus talked about the surprises there will be in the Kingdom of God: '*... people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.*' **(Luke 13.29-30)**. He may have addressed this originally to some of the Jewish Pharisees of his time, but isn't it likely that when it comes to the kingdom, all of us are in for a surprise?

Now, when we think about Pride, it's all too easy to think of people who seem to be outstanding instances of it – some of them almost caricatures. People in the public eye who seem to be the centre of their own

universes. But stop a minute and remember: Pride is something which lurks in us all. Have you not been proud at all this week – dismissive of others, building barriers between them and you, acting as though you don't need them with their particular personalities and gifts in any serious way?

What's the remedy for Pride? The obvious answer might be humility. But I don't think it's the right one. The cardinal or chief sin is best cured and driven out by the cardinal or chief virtue: and that, of course, is Love. And for a Christian, Love starts with *God's love for us* – the love which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts, the assurance that we don't have to make a good impression on God to be valued by him.

Getting back to our Gospel passage we find Jesus talking about people trying to make an impression – an impression of how important they are – or even, how humble. Isn't that, all too often what's uppermost in our minds when we mix with others? The quiet confidence that we are divinely loved, and therefore in some extraordinary way, lovable, helps us get past all that and really make space for another person when we encounter them – to give them our full attention,

instead of always reflecting back on how we think we're coming across. Jesus' parable describes that human reality which has been present in every age – the urge to find out who is influential, or rich or important, and make our best impression on them. Dwelling in the Love of God can help us get past that urge.

Jesus went on to tell people not to invite the rich to their parties, but the poor, the crippled and the lame. I don't think he's inviting us to get tied up in another kind of pride-game – being condescending to the disadvantaged and trying to make a good impression on God. I think he's urging us to love, to make *real* relationships, with people we might all too easily write off. To stop saying implicitly - 'I don't need you' to them.

The life of God's kingdom is the kind of life in which we all find how much we *do* need each other – how much the people who are commonly despised and left-out in this world actually have to give. This what Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche Communities discovered. If we try to make a new, and rather wooden law out of Jesus' commands to invite the poor to our parties, our condescension, our proud desire to be humble, will get

fatally in the way of building true relationships. But true love, true giving of attention to the last and the least, should help us discover exactly *why* 'the last are first' in the kingdom of God.