



**Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025**

Trinity XI - Service led by the Worship, Discipleship & Spirituality Group

**Readings:** Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Proverbs 25: 6-7; Luke 14: 1,7-14

### **The sin of pride and the virtue of humility**

In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul enjoins his readers to honour marriage, avoid the love of money, be content with what they have and share what they have. In today's gospel, Luke quotes Jesus, while a dinner guest of a leader of the Pharisees, saying that 'all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

An alternative lectionary reading for today is a passage from one of the books of the Apocrypha, Sirach; or to give it its full title Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach. I read it in full.

Sirach 10: 12-18

'The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin and the one who clings to it pours out abominations. Therefore the Lord brings upon them unheard of calamities, and destroys them completely. The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers and enthrones the lowly in their place. The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations and plants the humble in their place. The Lord lays waste the lands of nations, and destroys them to the foundations of the earth. He removes some of them and destroys them, and erases the memory of them from the earth. Pride was not created for human beings, or violent anger for those born of women.'

In Christian theology, pride is one of the so-called **seven deadly sins**, also known as the **capital vices** or **cardinal sins**. They are a grouping of major vices, partly based on Greco-Roman and earlier biblical antecedents.

The list of the seven deadly sins is:

**Pride:** an excessive belief in one's own abilities or importance;

**Greed:** an excessive desire for wealth or possessions;

**Wrath:** intense anger or fury;

**Envy:** a desire to have a quality, possession, or other desirable attribute belonging to someone else;

**Lust:** intense or unbridled sexual desire

**Gluttony:** overindulgence and overconsumption of anything to the point of waste;

and, finally, **Sloth:** laziness or lack of effort, especially in spiritual matters.

Pope Gregory in 590 AD revised existing lists from the fourth century and Thomas Aquinas uses and defends Gregory's list in his treatise, *Summa Theologica*.

During later times the idea of sins has influenced or inspired religious and philosophical thought, fine art painting and modern popular media, such as literature, film and television.

Martin Chemnitz, the sixteenth century Lutheran divine implored clergy to remind faithful congregations about the seven deadly sins. According to Henry Edward Manning, the nineteenth century Archbishop of Westminster, the seven deadly sins are seven ways to eternal death, or hell.

CS Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity* that pride is the anti-God state, the position in which the ego and the self are directly opposed to God.

“Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that Lucifer became wicked: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

Pride is also known as *hubris*, or futility and is considered the original and worst of the seven deadly sins, the most demonic on almost every list. It is often thought to be the source of the other capital sins. As we heard in the extract from Sirach:

‘The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers and enthrones the lowly in their place. The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations and plants the humble in their place. The Lord lays waste the lands of nations, and destroys them to the foundations of the earth. He removes some of them and destroys them, and erases the memory of them from the earth.’

In political analysis, the word *hubris* is often used to describe how powerful leaders become irrationally self-confident and contemptuous of advice over time, leading them to act impulsively.

How applicable indeed is the term *hubris* when one observes many of today’s world leaders in the way they manipulate contemporary politics and cause aggression, conflict and wars.

**Vainglory** is unjustified boasting. Gregory viewed this as a form of pride. Vainglory is the progenitor of envy.

It is interesting linguistically, and significant, how the use of such terms has evolved with time.

To "boast in the Lord" means to give all glory, praise, and honour to God for everything, rather than taking credit for one's own achievements or relying on worldly wisdom or strength. It involves finding confidence, identity, and validation in God's character and promises, fostering humility and gratitude. This biblical principle shifts the focus from self to God, making one's life and circumstances a testament to His power and goodness, encouraging others to seek Him.

The Latin term *gloria* roughly means boasting, although its English counterpart **glory** has come to have an exclusively positive meaning.

Historically, the term vain meant futile, as ‘in vain’ but by the fourteenth century had come to have the strongly narcissistic overtones we recognise today.

The antithesis of the vice of pride is the virtue of **humility**, or 'humbleness of heart', as today’s page in the URC prayer handbook has it. Throughout history God’s people have stumbled and strayed from the path He set before them. Our stubbornness and pride often prevent us from listening and seeking out where He might be leading us to next. We are asked in prayer to put aside our own sense of self-importance to see Him at work in the lives of our global siblings whom He calls us to serve and work alongside.

In Alexander Cruden’s ‘Useful Concordance of the Holy Scriptures’ (incidentally published in the edition I have at home by John Ritchie of Kilmarnock) and in the language of its time, he defines both the noun humility and the adjective humble as follows:

**Humility** - that grace of the Spirit which, from a proper sense of lowliness and unworthiness, makes us patient under trials, and contentedly submissive to the will of Providence.

**Humble** - lowly in mind before God, and not proud before men; and esteeming others better than ourselves, and not depreciating (deprecating?) other persons in order to exalt ourselves.

In our Proverbs and Luke readings, both passages remind us of the importance of humility in a world often obsessed with status and recognition. Proverbs offers wise counsel: don't seek a high position for yourself - let honour be given not taken. Jesus picks up this theme in Luke's gospel, turning a moment of table etiquette into an interesting teaching about the Kingdom of God. True honour comes from choosing the lower place and from inviting those who cannot repay you. Both passages teach us that pride leads to disgrace, but humility opens the way forward towards the people God wants us to be.

All these readings challenge conventional norms by calling for a selfless and inclusive approach to welcoming others. We are encouraged to extend hospitality to the poor, the outcast, those on the margins of society.

The words echo from Hebrews, 'some have entertained angels without knowing it', and 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.'

Together these passages emphasise that true hospitality reflects God's grace - offered freely and without expectation of favour or status.

At the heart of it all lies a Kingdom ethic that turns worldly values upside down.

In God's kingdom,

true honour is found in humility,

greatness is revealed through serving others,

worship is expressed in doing good

and righteousness is rooted in trusting God and acting with love.

May it be so. **Amen**

Alan Rickard