University Sermon

Preached

in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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University Sermon on the Sin of Pride

The great cathedral at Albi, in South-Western France is home to an extraordinary medieval depiction of the last judgement. Each of Hell's seven compartments depicts the torture inflicted upon those who have committed particular sins. Pride is the first. In the painted scene, bodies writhe with pain as they are broken on a wheel. The torments endured by the other souls in hell are no more pleasant.

Pride is one of the seven capital vices or cardinal sins. Along with Greed, Wrath, Envy, Lust, Gluttony and Sloth. Those of you who know me—or at least my functions as kitchen steward here at All Souls—might have expected me to speak on Gluttony. I am however constrained by the terms of the bequest made to the University by an alumnus of Christ Church who studied in troubled times: his B.A. was awarded by order of the parliamentary visitors of the University in 1650. After taking his M.A. when a bachelor-fellow of Merton, William Master was appointed the vicar of Preston, near Cirencester. Despite the legislation in force, he used the Book of Common Prayer for some rites. He would no doubt be relieved that the very words which moved him are still spoken in this chapel over three-and-a-half centuries later. Master spent his adult life in different parishes. His legacy from the impropriate tithes of Preston was both practical—funds for the repair of the vicarage

and better maintenance of its incumbent as well as assistance in money and books for the 'post masters and young scholars' of Merton—*and* spiritual: £5 *per annum* for two annual sermons, of which this is one. The other, preached on Quinquagesima Sunday takes as its subject the Virtue thought to counter Pride: the Grace of Humility.

Master himself reflected on virtues and vices, particularly in his 1653 work 'Λόγος Εὔκαιροι*, essayes and observations theologicall and moral: Wherein many of the humours and diseases of the age are discovered, and characteriz'd: divers cautions and directions praescribed for the avoidance of their infection, and the promotion of their cure. Together with some meditations and prayers adjoyn'd, serving to the same purpose*. The medical metaphor is familiar in these pandemic times. Despite its title, the book is not without humour[1]. It includes two sections which might have some bearing on our reflections. The first, 'Of Pride of Parts', opens thus:

> I Cannot perswade my selfe there is any sin more connaturall, and generall than Pride, and of all sorts of pride that of a mans parts. There is scarce a foole in the world but conceiteth many particulars in himselfe, wherein he excells other men; and scarce a wise man in the world but hath some alloy of this folly. The inbred flattery of our selves within us makes us (according to the proverb) thinke all our *own geese swans* and our most *deformed* issue *amiable.*

[1] The following note, relevant for all academics, illustrates this. It precedes a short list of *Errata*:
The mistakes of the Presses (for more than one was made use of for expedition sake) which seem most likely to endanger the sense are here corrected. As for smaller ones, it was thought fit rather to leave them to the Readers candor, than discourage him with a whole page of Errata's.

The author suggests, helpfully, that we should accept to appear weak to ourselves, and to others. Clearly he felt deep theological worries about pride's deleterious effects and hoped humility might counter them.

The second section of Master's book relevant this morning is 'Of Arguments for Sermons'. One could be tempted to read an ironic twinkle of the author's eye in the brackets part way through the opening sentence:

> A Man would think in this abundance of preaching, and preachers (God be praised for both) that there should not one point of divinity (of what nature soever) escape frequent discussion; and yet an observant Auditour may perceive it much otherwise.

Master supports the idea of fire-and-brimstone sermons: a preacher should call out sins and sinners in what he calls 'a stentor's voice' and we can all, he asserts, learn from being 'wisely and discreetly' instructed whereas, I quote, 'very many usefull practicall points are rarely handled in the Pulpit'. He alludes to the difficult times in which he lives and to questions on which one might appreciate guidance, adding: 'Many give us good store of cautions, and directions not to loose our way in a knowne beaten path: but leave us to guide our selves in those that are perillous, and untrod.' All sagacious words, but not precisely what I was looking to find: a recipe for the perfect sermon hidden somewhere in the book—Though I am the grand-daughter of a Church of England vicar, I fear that preaching skills are not passed down with genes!

I turned then to the historical figures who have preached this sermon before me. By any rough calculation[2] there must have been over 300 University sermons on the sin of Pride. The Bodleian's catalogue of printed works yielded a promising sounding text: *A Learned Sermon on the Nature of Pride* by Richard Hooker, but since he died in 1600, he cannot have pronounced it in the context of the Master bequest. The only other possible candidate was George Edmundson's 1911 *Intellect and Power, the 'Pride' Sermon*. The keeper of the University archive confirmed that there is no 'master list'—I am not sure if her pun was intentional—of the sermons. It would be possible to trawl through the *Gazette* looking for the announcements but only from the late 19th century. At this point I gave up[3].

Having failed to find external support, I would like to consider 'pride' first in relation to today's New Testament reading[4]. It is one from a series appointed—possibly by Master himself—as apposite for this sermon. The chapter struck me, amongst the options offered, because of its emphasis on languages and some aspects of its message. Verse 10 states: 'There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification.' This is I think a worthwhile lesson for us all and a reminder that even uncomfortable truths should be spoken.

[2] There may have been years when the sermon did not take place, and I am not sure how long it would have taken for the 1684 bequest to take effect.
[3] I discovered one pleasing fact: until 1899, the sermons on the sin of Pride were *always* delivered on the Sunday before Advent so we are in keeping with that particular tradition
[4] 1 Cor 14.

Universities in particular *must* be havens for the expression of ideas which go *against* the majority view and are ready to challenge us *one and all*. They are not places where one should sink into complacency or bland acquiescence. I was also interested in the distinction Saint Paul draws between language and prophecy, not because I wish to adopt it, but because it points us, I think, in a salutary direction, that of choosing our vocabulary carefully and seeking out nuances wherever we can.

A fashionable game in late eighteenth-century French salons was called *Synonymes* or *Synonyms*. The players were given two words which are close in meaning and might sometimes seem interchangeable and asked to tease out the distinctions. From anonymous men and women to formidable intellectuals like Germaine de Staël, many people tried their hand at this. You heard the choir sing some beautiful French words exquisitely set by Camille Saint-Saëns,[5] so I will spare you a French example of these Synonyms. I will however suggest a modern-day equivalent which involves me pronouncing, in Chapel, the word which one of my grandmothers, who was born in 1911, believed, in her childhood, to be the rudest word in the English language. Presumably, this requires a 'trigger warning'… the word is 'knickers'. Here goes for an example of quick distinctions between the meanings of close words. A family friend from Dublin was asked by her Spanish au pair what the difference was between 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed'. 'Well, Jo quipped, if you were going along Grafton Street and your knickers fell down, you'd be embarrassed, but if they were dirty, you'd feel ashamed.' An efficient example indeed as I am sure you will all agree.

[5] *Les Fleurs et les arbres,* sung by the choir of The Queen's College under the direction of Owen Rees.

Now let us think about 'Pride' and some of *its* close relatives in terms of meaning. I mentioned the beautiful music. I hope the members of the choir were proud of their performance and that Saint-Saëns might take pride in knowing how uplifting his piece sounds to us. So how can we reclaim this positive feeling, the pride a parent might have in their child or a teacher in their pupil, for instance, and distinguish it from the attitudes condemned by Master and those who see pride as a sin? I am often struck, even here in Oxford (though there are far worse places), by forms of entitlement which have perverse effects and lead to greater recognition for those who speak loudest or conform most clearly to a set of criteria whether protected (sex or race, for instance) or not (type of school attended, disciplinary choices and so on). Their correlation—through the effect they have on others—is imposter syndrome from which I, and many like me, particularly women or those who come from what we term 'non-traditional' backgrounds are most likely to suffer. More widely, through forms of entitlement, people claim rights without considering the extent to which these might impose on others for instance when children are damaged by parents who consider themselves *entitled* to yield to their own desires without regard for the effect this might have on their offspring, when blurring boundaries between professionalism and friendship leads to attributions of contracts or of jobs without regard for possible conflicts of interest or indeed when nations refuse to see that their lifestyle is compromising the very existence of others.

The latter example allows me to bring in a distinction between Pride and Entitlement in relation to our Old Testament lesson. Saint-Saëns' lines start by celebrating *Les fleurs et les arbres*. The verses from Ecclesiasticus tell of the beauty of Nature, reminding us that its forces are greater than we are. A few lines before the start of the passage we heard there comes an evocation of the sun reminding us that 'At noon it parcheth the country' and asking 'who can abide the heat thereof?' As temperatures increase owing to our own human activity, we urgently need to take action to improve the lot of all, particularly of those who live in less affluent environments and—I am a passionate believer in this—of those who belong to younger generations. They are leading the way in raising awareness. They will also inherit the earth after us, but in what state? We must take *pride* in our environment and do all we can to protect it rather than act, as we tend to, in the so-called Western world, in an *entitled* fashion. This will of course require sacrifices both individual and collective. Clearly, we must strive for greater balance, generosity and fairness. That is one of the ways of interpreting the New Testament reading which, in the style of the time, invites us to reflect and act accordingly: 'Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.'

I quoted earlier from William Master's work. Its conclusion holds a salutary lesson expressed through a suitably alimentary metaphor for a kitchen steward let loose in a pulpit:

> 'I Shall here stoppe my pen, for I doubt my reader may thinke what is past more than enough of such dough-baked considerations. Those that remaine I shall keepe by me till I perceive how these are digested.'

I have been speaking rather than writing. To end, I would like to refer not to a sermon by my maternal grand-father, the vicar, but an article by my paternal grand-father, the academic. Having failed to find the historic sermons on pride, I give you the beginning of 'Evolutionary theory, developmental psychology, and intelligence' by George Seth:

> The nameless Scots preacher survives in folklore because his sermon was about sin. He is reported to have been against it. I propose to reflect upon intelligence, and a little upon its assessment. For the solace of the applied psychologists who may be around, burdened by a degree of uncertainty, dissonance, anxiety, and even guilt—I am *for* it.[6]

Somewhere between the two, *Pace* William Master, I hope this sermon will have shown you that pride, in my view is not always a sin. It all depends on what you mean by pride...

[6] *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 1978, iv, 1, 1-13.