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John 3:22-26
Norman S. Ream

HUMILITY

"He must grow greater and greater and I
less and less.

John 3:30

The English statesman and political writer of the seventeenth century, John Selden, once wrote of humility: "Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice; and yet everybody is content to hear." He was, I should judge, a bit cynical.

In that section of the Gospel of Luke which our Roman Catholic friends refer to as The Magnificat and in which the mother of Jesus rejoices in the promise concerning her child, there are to be found these words about God:

"He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them
of low degree."

Yes, through the strange and mysterious workings of Providence there have been a few humble souls in history who have been exalted and those who would be mighty and powerful are often brought down with shocking swiftness, as witness Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, Khrushchev, etc., etc. In spite of these lessons which history has to offer, however, most men and women still shun humility, and even those who admire it in others eschew it in themselves.

The ancient Mahayana scriptures of Buddhism tell us how to become humble:

"Do you wish to be invisible? Then for two years never have a thought
of yourself for a single second. After that no one will notice you."

Some of us may occasionally covet invisibility, but not at such a price as this. Most of us want to be seen, want to be noticed. We want to stand out in the midst of the crowd. Then, sometimes, we grow older and acquire more wisdom.

Humility however is the sine qua non, the essential ingredient, of effectual religion. Without humility no man can come to God. Oneness with God is the very antithesis of self-craving and an all-absorbing self-concern. We cannot see God when our self stands constantly in the way. When that self is removed through humility God is revealed and we are re-created by the sight.

An illustration should suffice to make clear the point. Hold a coin close to the eye and all you can see is the image of the coin. The farther away from the eye the coin is held, the more one can see of the rest of the world, the more one can properly see his own place in it and his relationship to it. To covet money or the things money will buy, or to covet prestige and power, is to put something unworthy in front of the eye of the soul and so to shut out God. To put the self in first place is also to shut out God.

II

John the Baptist was, as you recall, Jesus' cousin. He had begun his ministry before Jesus and had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, recognizing him as having a much greater insight into the truth of God than himself. John had also gathered some disciples. They came to him wondering why Jesus was attracting so many more people than

John. John had no hesitation in telling them with profound humility that Jesus was greater than himself:

"He must grow greater and greater and
I less and less."

This is the proper goal for every true Christian--to glorify God through Jesus Christ that He may grow greater and greater and we less and less.

Now let me ask you this: Is all that you are now doing in preparation for Christmas directed toward this end? It ought to be. If it is not then we ought just forget about Christmas and have a big secular celebration. Christmas acknowledges history's greatest cataclysmic event--God coming into man's world through Jesus Christ. How much of what we busy ourselves with during the Christmas season has anything to do with honoring Jesus Christ and glorifying God? Everything we do during the Christmas season can have this effect if we constantly keep in our minds and in our hearts the real purpose of it all, if we are seeking to glorify God in all that we do, if we are constantly conscious of the fact that God has given of Himself to men.

Let us examine for a moment the humility of Christ. His whole life was devoted not to drawing men to himself, but in pointing them to God. When someone called him, "Good Master", he replied, "Why do you call me good; there is none good but God." When men marvelled at his works, he tried to suppress the knowledge of his power and insisted, "Greater things than I have done you shall do." To crown it all, this man who could have commanded an army and ruled a whole people, "humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross."

It is this man of humility whom we honor at Christmas. It is this man, meek and lowly at heart, whom, if we bear the name of Christian, we have promised to follow.

"Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born,
If he's not born in thee
Thy soul is still forlorn."

III

Now, to ask the question put by William Knox;

"Why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a fast flitting meteor, a fast
flying cloud,
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave,
He passes from life to his rest in the grave."

Why indeed should the spirit of mortal be proud? Poets, authors and artists have all contemplated the brevity, and what often appears to be the insignificance, of human life. Shakespeare's Hamlet muses over the skull of Yorick, the jester and asks:

"Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs?
Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the
table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own
grinning....To what base uses we may return Horatio!
Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of
Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung hole?"

The portrait of St. Francis contemplating a skull, done by Zurbaran, and the original of which hangs in Milwaukee's Art Center, asks the same question in a magnificent way: "Why should the spirit of mortal be proud?"

Now, lest anyone think I am discrediting man, let me hasten to add that there is a big difference between despising human nature and recognizing it for what it is. The former attitude is one of hopelessness and despair, the latter puts its faith in man's potentiality. Isaac Watts expressed the former morbid attitude when he put into his hymn the words:

"Great God! How infinite art Thou!
What worthless worms are we!"

The only reason we are not worthless worms is that God does care about us, is trying to work with us, and has revealed through Jesus Christ what we may yet become.

Harlow Shapley tells in his book, The View From a Distant Star, of watching a certain species of ant which we know has been on the earth for over one hundred million years. It has made no evolutionary progress in all that time. Man has made so much progress it scares him. It is the potential in man that gives him such great worth. But the potential is not of his own making. He can take no pride in it. Rather he should be ashamed that he has realized so small a portion of it. His great potential only lays upon him a greater responsibility.

There is a distinction you see between false pride and a deep feeling of thanksgiving and appreciation for the goodness and mercy of God. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the difference is to refer to the story of a former governor of the state of Minnesota, John Johnson. After a distinguished address before a distinguished company, he was asked by a friend, "Governor, this must be the proudest day of your life, speaking before this assemblage: judges, senators, congressmen." "No, it isn't", replied Johnson. "The proudest day of my life was when I was a boy of twelve and on receiving my first pay of three dollars for a week's work I went home to my mother and said, 'Here, mother, you won't need to take in washing anymore.'"

But this was not really pride you see. It was thanksgiving, and humility, and a recognition that love must rule the relationships of men.

If you discovered one day that your driveway was full of tacks, what would you do? Stock up on tire patches and spare tires, or sweep the tacks out of the driveway? If your family was continually getting sick because of unsanitary conditions in your neighborhood, would you stock up on patent medicines, or would you try to remove the unsanitary conditions? In a world suffering from a lack of love and understanding because of the pride and vanity of men, what is the solution? To become proud and vain ourselves in order that we might compete with the pride and vanity of others, or to practice love, understanding, and humility and thus to follow the way of Christ?

The worst danger of pride is that it shuts the door so that God can no longer come in.

"If thou couldst't empty all thyself of self,
Like to a shell dishabited.
Then might he find thee on the ocean shelf,
And say--'This is not dead',--
And fill thee with himself instead.

"But thou art all replete with very thou,
And hast such shrewd activity,
That when He comes, He says--This is enow
Unto itself--'Twere better let it be.
It is so small and full, there is no room for me."

Was John Selden right when he said, "Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice, and yet everybody is content to hear?" God help us if he was, for without humility the way to God is barred.