

Trinity 17 2020 The dangers of vainglory, and the invitation to glory  
Psalm 33.6-12, Ephesians 4.1-6, Luke 14.1-11  
The Principal.

***And behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy.***

***And Jesus ... took him, and healed him, and let him go... that he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher***

“Public health experts have voiced concerns that Dominic Cummings did undermine public trust in lockdown rules, going against the principle of integrity that is in the code of conduct. “Will the Cabinet Office conduct an investigation into potential breaches of the code of conduct by Mr Cummings, or have ministers yet again decided that they have had enough of experts?”

These were Margaret Ferrier’s questions to the Cabinet Office on 11 June. Among other regrets, she may wish now that she had not made her disapproval of Dominic Cummings so public.

Margaret Ferrier is the SNP Member of Parliament who travelled from Glasgow to London while she was waiting for results from a Covid-19 test. On Monday, she spoke in the House of Commons. Later that day she received a positive test result for Covid-19. Knowing that she had coronavirus, she travelled back to Glasgow by train, public transport.

In a statement, Ms Ferrier said: ‘I apologise unreservedly for breaching Covid-19 restrictions by travelling this week when I shouldn’t have. There is no excuse for my actions.’ She didn’t mention Dominic Cummings.

It’s risky to use this example, because in doing so, I may encourage in myself and in you the very same error that she displays to us, in using this example there is a risk that we may fall into the same error that we see revealed in the Gospel, and one into which we have, almost certainly, fallen many times.

So, we look to this present day example with some sadness, not with exultation. We look with humility, and perhaps with a bit of fear, knowing how easy it is to fall into the same sin, to choose it almost without realizing it.<sup>1</sup> How then might we cultivate good judgement, godly judgement? How can we live as people of integrity in the heat of conflict or confusion?

Here we may find help by turning to the Gospel, and to the guidance which our Lord offers. The Lord Jesus is in the house of one of the chief Pharisees. He’s there with a religious expert, a bishop or archdeacon, a parish priest, perhaps an expert in canon law, or a professor with a chair in theology. There is a man who has dropsy. It’s an illness which is easy to see, ‘a condition marked by the body’s inability to process fluids’.<sup>2</sup> The man would have been puffed up with excess water. The sufferer with dropsy is always thirsty, but not satisfied.

***And Jesus answering spake unto the Lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath-day? And they held their peace.***

We can infer from this silence, and from other examples, that the Pharisees and Lawyers looked on this as a breach in the rules of the Sabbath. Our Lord appears to them to be breaking the code of

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<sup>1</sup> We may also look in sympathy – most of us don’t have to live out our mistakes and sins so publicly. Neither should we underestimate the confusion and fears that Ms Ferrier experienced when she made her decisions this week.

<sup>2</sup> Chad Hartsock (Carson-Newman University, USA) ‘The Healing of the Man with Dropsy (Luke 14:1-6) and the Lukan Landscape’, *Biblical Interpretation 21* (2013) 341-354, Brill.

conduct. In this case, our Lord invites them to see that it is they who are in need of healing, they are the ones suffering from spiritual dropsy.<sup>3</sup>

***Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath-day?***

His point is not only that the life of the man is as important and worthy as the life of an ox and or an ass, but also that they have puffed themselves up, they have displaced the higher law of love. Their tight-lipped silence is not a sign of integrity. What masquerades as virtue is a kind of pride, 1<sup>st</sup> century virtue signalling, self-promotion pretending to be goodness.

Pride is the sin of putting self in the place of God as the centre and objective of our life. The context suggests that the form of pride on display here is vain-glory, a love of a false or empty glory. Because vainglory seeks an empty glory, it's hard to pin down, but we can recognize it by the signs which come with it. This kind of false-virtue seeks praise or status. Vain glory is not the true glory which says, Friend come up higher, vainglory pushes others down.

The parable suggests that our Lord sees both of these signs in those who rebuke him silently – the Pharisees and Lawyers are those who want to have praise in the front of others, they want the highest seat. They do not see the value, the weight of glory, in the sick man in need, or in the one who speaks to them. They don't say, Friend, come up higher, but get out of my way, don't you see how important we are.

Vainglory is a frightening sin, because it does not attack the person who doesn't bother or doesn't care. Vain glory is the sin which attacks those who are progressing in the life of virtue. If we are going to risk pointing to our own virtue or goodness, we probably have something to put on display. This is why vain glory is a such frightening sin, it uses our strengths to tempt us.

It is also significant that we hear this parable today. The Xn year which stretches from Advent to Advent sums up the Christian life. First, the life of Christ is put before us, we step from eternity into time, we encounter the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things who is born among us. We follow his life and meditate on his works, his teaching, his passion and resurrection, his ascension and sending of the Spirit. Then, in second half of year, we follow Christ's life again as it is worked out in us. Our lives our hid with Christ and God, and how the one we seek takes possession of us is our focus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the year. Every year sums up the cycle of time, and every year puts before us the beginning and end of our lives in Christ. At this part of the year, the Gospels we here put toward the fulfilment, the perfection, the destination, toward which we are headed. ***Friend, come up higher.***

We hear this gospel now because it is precisely as we grow in Christ, precisely as we go up higher, that the false promises of vainglory tempt us to throw ourselves down. Vainglory is a sin which tempts us when we are making progress. We can assume that Margaret Ferrier has a zeal for a well-ordered public life, a respect for integrity of the law, a desire to see her constituents flourish. She is trusted person, chosen both by her party, and then by the electorate. And then, after all that, she made a very public mistake, one which goes against the very principles she holds. How do we make this kind of mistake, one that undermines or contradicts the best of our principles? The answer of the tradition is vainglory, a sin which happens when we put a false picture of ourselves where God belongs. The fall of the angels which was described in readings for Michaelmas on Tuesday is sometimes described this one. Tradition suggests that Lucifer was one of the most beautiful and wise angels who chose the glory of God reflected in himself over the Glory of God which was the source of all his beauty and

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<sup>3</sup> He is obedient to the law of love, a higher law not of self-interest, but the law that gives life. He tries to show them this but pointing out how they would act in another practical way:

wisdom. We are invited to discern any symptoms of spiritual drowsiness in ourselves now, because it is precisely if we have made some progress this year of our Lord, we are most vulnerable.

The gospel for today is also a particular good one for the almost-beginning of the academic year. The glory of the university is the treasure of knowledge and wisdom which the university seeks and builds up. A Canadian theologian Robert Crouse wonderfully describes the connection between the thirst for knowledge and the thirst for God:

‘All men by nature desire to know’, says Aristotle at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*. But what is it that they desire to know? They long to know the reasons of things, the causes, the truth of things; finally to know that truth by which and in which all things have their truth ...<sup>4</sup> What are all our sciences, what are all our fragments of knowledge but droplets from that fountain of which we long to drink in all its fulness? ‘My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God’.

What is our quest for happiness, but a desire for the good; and what is that good we seek – whether knowingly or not – but some participation in the pure and perfect good which is God himself? What is our quest for liberty, but our longing for God's own city, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is above, and is free, and is the mother of us all? ‘My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God’ (Ps. 84:2). What is our quest for beauty, but a longing for that pure and perfect beauty which belongs to Sion; and what are all our fragmentary images of beauty, whether in music, or painting, or sculpture, or poetry, or whatever human arts, but pallid reflections of the unimaginable beauty of the countenance of God? ‘My heart hath talked of thee, Seek ye my face: thy face Lord, will I seek’.<sup>5</sup>

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Friend, come up higher, is one way of describing our Lord's invitation to seek knowledge, to find him in all his ways and works.

And yet, the search for knowledge can also be corrupted by the vainglory which is revealed in the gospel. Instead of shining a light, knowledge can become an instrument of power. Instead of shining a light, knowledge can be turned into a spotlight turned back on the scholar, a kind of spotlight of vain glory. It's very hard to distinguish, in the present, the difference between the knowledge and wisdom which endures, and the passing fads or speculations of our time. Every age has its passing fads, every age has its cult of false knowledge, and it's very tempting to step into this reflected light ourselves.

This is of course very much in the news – when is following the experts an abdication of reasonability, and when is following the experts the only responsible and wise thing to do? And how do we recognize the true experts from the false ones, the bare facts are never bare, knowledge always need to be applied?

Gospel for today teaches that integrity is not just a question of having the right facts, but that wisdom is a kind of moral knowledge. Dr Pusey summed this out by saying that ‘What is Divine in it can be read only by what is Divine in man.’<sup>i</sup>

The ‘word of God’ is a seed which ‘must find something congenial with itself in the soil into which it falls’.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Thus Dante, in the **Paradiso**, compares the intellect's desire to a wild beast's racing to its den, where alone it can find rest.’

<sup>5</sup> Robert Crouse, ‘Heavenly Avarice’

The gospel presents integrity as the gift of healing, a healing which is not only administered to the man in the Gospel, but a healing which is part of our lives in Christ. For the early Christian interpreters of the Bible, the symptoms of dropsy picture a spiritual illness which is always a threat. St Augustine sums up this tradition:

‘But we correctly compare a person with dropsy to an avaricious rich man, [a greedy man]. For, just as the more a man with dropsy abounds in excessive fluid, the more he thirsts, so the more a rich man abounds in riches that he does not use well, the more he desires such’.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine comments further:

‘You see, the disease of dropsy means that the body is full of fluid ...<sup>7</sup> and yet never has enough fluid. In the same way a dropsical heart means the more you have, the more you need’, the more you want.<sup>8</sup>

To be afflicted with dropsy is to try to satisfy our thirst with what cannot satisfy. Vainglory is vain because the glory we seek does not have the substance which satisfies. The invitation, Friend come up higher, is the invitation to give our desire its proper end.

What is our quest for happiness, but a desire for the good; and what is that good we seek – whether knowingly or not – but some participation in the pure and perfect good which is God himself? What is our quest for liberty, but our longing for God's own city, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is above, and is free, and is the mother of us all? ... what are all our fragmentary images of beauty, whether in music, or painting, or sculpture, or poetry, or whatever human arts, but pallid reflections of the unimaginable beauty of the countenance of God?

What are the signs of this false glory? If we discover that when we seek to do what is right we are shining a spotlight on ourselves, whether for the praise of others, or for our own satisfaction, we may be mixed up true glory with false. If our defence of what is good is a way of stepping on others, that is another sign that we may be in the grip of vainglory. St Paul spells this out very practically: ‘walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love’

This lowliness is not a grovelling abasement. This is the kind of lowliness which is confident in the love of our Lord Jesus who takes each of us by the hand and lifts us up. Today, we are invited to give our desire its proper end, to let our hunger for knowledge recognize the end of all our striving: Friend come up higher. When we come to receive the sacrament of our Lord's body and blood, we feed on life which alone can satisfy, we seek his presence, and his healing touch, we seek the wisdom of God in whom truth and goodness is one. We are probably all too aware of the lack of integrity in our lives...

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<sup>6</sup> *The Works of Saint Augustine (4th Release). Electronic Edition, New Testament I and II, Questions on the Gospels 2.2.*

<sup>7</sup> and is indeed endangered by fluid,

<sup>8</sup> *The Works of Saint Augustine (4th Release). Electronic Edition. Sermons, (148-183) on the New Testament. Volume III/5. SERMON 177: ON THE WORDS OF THE APOSTLE, 1 TIMOTHY 6:7-19: WE BROUGHT NOTHING INTO THIS WORLD, AND WHAT IS MORE WE CANNOT TAKE ANYTHING OUT OF IT, ETC.; A DISCOURSE ON AVARICE* p 283. ‘Desires, after all, mean that you want to attain to what you haven't yet got, because you never desire what you already have. Avarice is indeed insatiable; and even with people who already have much one can still talk about desire, not for the thing they possess, but for the one they want to possess. He owns this farm, he desires to get possession of another which he doesn't own. But when he's also got that one, he will start desiring another; he won't, however, be desiring what he's already acquired, but what he hasn't yet acquired.’

‘When you had less, you wanted less, you could enjoy yourself with fewer things, you were thrilled with small sums in your coffers. But because you have now been filled, it means you have also been stretched, you've become grossly opulent, legacies coming in daily; you go on drinking, and go on being thirsty. “If I can get this, I'll be able to do that’.

The invitation to ‘Go up higher’ is an invitation to a kind of spiritual warfare, it is an urgent invitation to struggle with whatever blocks our path, with whatever disconnects us from the environment of God’s purposes for us. The invitation to come up higher is an invitation to enjoy our communion with the Lord Jesus in the Body of Christ, and to enjoy all that comes with it.

‘Our quest for happiness’, in all its forms, is a desire which finds its satisfaction in this invitation. It is a desire ‘some participation in the pure and perfect good which is God himself’. ‘My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God’ (Ps. 84:2). ‘My heart hath talked of thee, Seek ye my face: thy face Lord, will I seek’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Crouse, ‘Heavenly Avarice’

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<sup>i</sup> Pusey, 'Book of Nature' (MS), in Westhaver, 'Living Body', p. 238.

<sup>ii</sup> Jones, *Lectures*, p. 12.