

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 28<sup>th</sup> August 2022**

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In our Bible readings for today, we heard a clear message of humility, and so I want to reflect on what that teaches us as Christians in modern society.

In the last few weeks, like many of you, I've been on holiday. Catching up with old friends that I haven't been able to see, in some cases for 18 years.

The downside of seeing old friends is that they can remind you of very stupid and highly embarrassing moments from your younger days. Isn't youth a wonderful time for learning! But I am not going to share any of my stories with you today, otherwise we'd be here all day!

I'm talking about friends. True friends. The nice thing is that people that have known you for a long time, they know the real you. They understand what's important to you, what your weaknesses are, even what is most annoying about you! And yet, despite all that, still they want to be your friend.

We don't have to pretend around these people. In fact, if we do pretend to be something different, they will usually bring us back down to earth very quickly!

We have to be humble to be the same person that they have known for years. And that's one reason why we value them as friends, in case we try to become something we are not.

The message to be humble is easy to say but hard to do in this society. We are taught to 'reach for what we want' and to 'not let anyone stop us', so humility can sound like a difficult word, even a ridiculous one. "If you're humble they'll just walk all over you" seems to be the message.

Our true friends keep us humble and grounded. But that's not easy in this society. There is a decline of Western Christian culture. One book on the subject opens with

the words “There is a flow to history and culture” and the flow in society is undoubtedly towards the cult of celebrity. The Instagram influencer, the billionaire businessman, the famous footballer, the pompous politician (I’ll let you choose which one). They seek our admiration and their recognition until they become famous. And then strangely it flips, and we seek theirs. And along the way, they often pretend to show humility as a way of growing their popularity.

But true humility is deeply humbling. Let me explain what I mean.

In eastern France, we find the Taizé community. A Christian community of 120 brothers who commit to live together. When they join the community they relinquish all their worldly possessions. They give it all away - not to their own community, but to the poor. They enter the community with nothing except their white robes. Even the vegetables they grow are given to local people in need. That to me, is true humility.

Hebrews 13:5

**Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."**

Yet at Taizé every day, hundreds of young people come from all around the world to be with these brothers. To sit and watch and talk to and learn from them as they go about their daily prayers and worship and just to experience some of the wonder of life in the community. As a visitor, one is just humbled by being in the presence of the brothers, who have humbled themselves in a society that does the opposite. It’s very strange isn’t it?

True humility is humbling.

I imagine that’s how it might have been to be in the presence of Christ. Who had everything, but gave it all up for others, for a simple life.

Humility is a very clear theme in the Bible. In Luke 14, Jesus teaches us not to assume the positions of praise and pride:

**Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, ‘Friend, move up here**

**to a better seat.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."**

This echoes Proverbs 25:

**Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.**

In our celebrity-obsessed world, the quest for recognition, influence, wealth, fame and the praise of others drives too many of us. But in the end, this pride-filled drive leads us into conflict and destructiveness, as all of life becomes a game of winners and losers. Who is the one who got noticed? Who got the top job?

On a bigger scale, the priorities of whole nations are placed into conflict as politicians wrestle to find a place in the corridors of world power, while their people's needs are used as bargaining chips or forgotten altogether. Just look at Putin's war in Ukraine.

Values, integrity and fidelity all end up being expendable. They are replaced by a need for success or victory or popularity, and the ends justifies any means. But, of course, the ones who end up paying the most are those at the 'bottom' of the game – the innocent losers - the homeless, the refugees, the addicts, the patients on waiting lists, the families on benefit. They have no influence; they are just pawns in a bigger game of power and influence.

Humans seek power and authority and praise. We seek to climb the slippery pole of careers or community involvement. And that's when we become most vulnerable. We think we can then choose how to behave. The rules don't apply to us anymore, and so we see many examples of people accused of behaviour that is shameful and illegal. Humanity is fallible, greedy and proud, ever since the Garden of Eden. We build these celebrities up, and we watch as they rise. And then, like a firework, bang, it's all gone and quiet.

Ecclesiasticus 10:14-17

**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 the 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.**

When our earthly lives are over, and our achievements and our possessions are stripped away, we are all the same.

The Bible teaches us that that true, vibrant, authentic life is found in simplicity, fidelity, contentment and humility, even if to our ears it may sound naive and out of touch.

And let's not pretend it's easy. True humility requires courage. The courage that can only come from God's strength. When all around us, the signs of success seems to shout "I have, I know, I am", we have to have courage to say "I don't have, I don't know, I am not"

The brothers at Taizé have nothing. Yet they have everything. There is a real freedom in humility. We can be authentic with ourselves and each other.

Returning to the idea of friendship – Jesus is our oldest and most faithful friend. No matter what we have done in the past. He knows it and yet He still loves us unconditionally, despite it all. The son of the all-powerful God who overthrows rulers, plucks up the roots of the nations and destroys them, is the same loving God who humbly welcomes every one of us to his banquet.

Amen.