

Sunday 27A 27.9.26.

What goes on most days in a monastery is a battle of wills. We may sugar-coat it sometimes in religious or even psychological language but the felt experience, or my experience, is usually one of being challenged to do something one would rather not , over and over again. A challenge to say “yes’ rather than ‘no’ and then to do it, and to do it without grumbling – an attitude St Benedict several times comes back to. He knew full well the interior grumbling that goes on in most of us – the grumbling that makes us unhappy and the grumbling that we then impose on others, the exterior grumbling that can make a whole community unhappy: the sighs and groans and rolling of the eyes which express dissatisfaction . It’s there in all of us but in a commentary on the Cloud of Unknowing the author gives us hope that the existence of this grumbling in ourselves is not in itself a sign that we’ll never get it right . The author (of the Cloud of Unknowing) distinguishes between

*“ imperfect and perfect humility. Humility in essence is truth: the understanding and awareness of self as one truly is. Imperfect humility sees oneself as wretched because it is rooted in sin but perfect humility sees oneself only in contrast to the ‘ superabundant love and worthiness of God”, it is the sight of which “ all nature trembles”. It is simply the experience of creaturehood. Both types of humility are important. One cannot attain perfect humility without having imperfect humility first” (JM North)*

So even sin can be the raw material for holiness. Even that second son, representing the chief priests and the elders, is not condemned utterly for his present failure to be true to God, true to himself. The tax collectors and the prostitutes, represented by the first son, now enter the kingdom of God first despite saying no to God by their lives but then coming to belief, to living a true life, a true “yes” later to be followed by the chief priest and elders if they can heed the meaning of the parable for themselves. It’s not told to condemn but to bring conversion of heart.

We could introduce a third son here to represent another degree of imperfect humility: the one who says yes to a task but then finds someone else to do it for him, or a fourth son, who says no because of a whole list of excuses which make it impossible to obey, or a fifth son who has at last learnt purity of heart, transparency, the integrity of holiness, the one who says yes and means it : the Christ who has learnt to obey through suffering. There’s a story told of or by the philosopher Wittgenstein which may illustrate this perfection-

One day a man laying bricks calls down to his mate, “Bring me some bricks.”

The bricklayer’s mate brings him some bricks.

That’s “meaning”, that’s perfect love, that’s mutual obedience -the point being that neither the bricklayer nor his mate are couching their respective actions in any such terms. They

are simply getting on with the job, being who they are. It's our call too and one day, as the Rule of St Benedict delightfully puts it, through our constant practise of meeting the challenges of each day without grumbling we may find ourselves running "*along the way of God's commandments with a delight of love that cannot be described.*" And indeed, like the bricklayer and his mate, doesn't need to be.

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