

Judges 4: 1-7

Psalm 123

Pentecost 24 2020.

I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

St. Matthew 25: 14-30

“Too long our soul has been sated with the scorn of those who are at ease, the contempt of the proud.”
Psalm 123: 4

Pride. Pride is perhaps the most misunderstood vice. In our culture we often use “pride” in a good way – and it sometimes can be... If a child tries hard at a new task, and the child’s mother or father says, “Well done! I’m so proud of you!” – then the son or daughter rightfully develops confidence to try something which is hard. It’s important that we give genuine complements to one another. In our culture, we can be too quick to criticize or condemn, and too slow to give praise...

On TV, I’ve been watching episodes of – wait for it! – a British baking show competition. In this show, the amateur chefs are given hard recipes and only a short time to complete them. The judge is a professional chef named Paul, and on this show, Paul doesn’t give out complements easily. If the cake isn’t cooked, he knows, and Paul will say so... But if a contestant gets it right, Paul gives praise. It’s easy to see that when Paul praises a cook, when he says, “You should be proud,” it’s a real complement... So, acknowledgment of a big achievement is one way we use the word “pride” in our culture, and it’s a good thing...

Gay pride parades, and movements for minority rights, is another way Canadians use the word “pride” today... It’s meant to communicate that we should not be ashamed about who we are...

Why, then, is pride considered a big sin in classical Christianity? Among the seven vices – gluttonous over-eating, avarice (that is, an unhealthy love for money), and so on, “pride” is sometimes called “the sin from which all others arise.” “Pride” gives birth to other sins... So, what is pride, and what’s very often wrong with it?...

At its best, pride is seeing in me the gifts and talents which God has given *me*, to help make the world more beautiful... At its best, pride is seeing in one’s self or others qualities which, if used, help make the world a better place, even a tiny bit...

But when we start to focus on our *own* talents, we easily run into danger... One danger is to think too *little* of ourselves – “I am a worthless worm” is wrongly putting ourselves down. It’s saying that God’s created being – me – has no value... We can be rebellious, immoral, or criminals, but God does not create junk. Every human being is made in God’s image. It’s wrong to think too little of ourselves, because that’s ultimately putting God down...

But more often, we humans tend to go to the other end of the spectrum! We begin to think too *much* of ourselves – to put ourselves above others, or even to avoid giving God any credit. Pride can easily move from thinking about ourselves just the right way, to thinking too much of ourselves...

There is a true recent story of a criminal in Montana. He was on the run from police. According to the *Great Falls Tribune*, the thief could not resist going on the internet. He found a copy of his own Wanted poster on the police's Facebook page, and admired it, and then proceeded to "like" his own Wanted poster. As a result, the police were able to track down this proud thief, and arrest him... In thinking too much about himself and his own supposed cleverness, the thief was led to his own downfall. "Pride comes before a fall," says the Bible...

During the Middle Ages, there was no printing press, and many people could not read. So there would sometimes be groups of Christian actors, who would go from town to town in western Europe, with dramatic plays about Bible stories or lessons how to live for God. The actors would pull up to the marketplace in one town, put on a play, and be fed and housed. The next day they would journey to the *next* town, and do it again.

One of the most popular of these Medieval plays was about the fall of the devil from heaven. The story was presented like this: God sits on his throne and has all kinds of angels around him, including Lucifer himself. (Lucifer, which is a Latin word meaning "a carrier of the light" or "light-bearer," is one of the top-dog angels.) But one day God has to leave his throne on some business, and wanders away. While the throne is empty, Lucifer admires the empty throne, and begins to think what fun it would be if he sat on the throne for a while. Then *he* would be in charge, not God... Pride gets the better of Lucifer. He sneaks up, sits on the throne, and begins to enjoy the new rank which he has stolen... But then, God returns, and in his wrath, God drives the devil and his demon minions from heaven to the kingdom of darkness...

Now this is a play, and uses symbols or pictures. Obviously God – an immortal Spirit -- does not literally sit on a grand chair in heaven! But this play has a profound insight into the nature of pride – of claiming above what it is ours to claim...

In today's gospel reading, we read that we are supposed to make use of the gifts or talents, financial or otherwise, which God has invested in us. Not too little. Not too much. But the glory goes ultimately to God...

That's the remedy for pride, you see. We're not to become self-obsessed or self-centred... But if we start to look at people around us with the compassionate perspective of God, and if we begin to express gratitude to God for all that God has done and is doing (even what God has done when each of us were created) – when we move from being self-

absorbed to looking to God, and looking to other people, that is how we learn to leave the vice of pride behind...

Today's psalmist recalls the pride of those around him. He writes, "'Too long our soul has been sated with the scorn of those who are at ease, the contempt of the proud...'" Beware the sin of pride, my friends. Look with gratitude and love to God, and the love he shows supremely in Jesus Christ.... Look with love and compassion to others...

So far we've talked about the personal slips of pride – when we think too much of our own accomplishments, and put down others or ignore the Lord. But there is also such a thing as *national* pride, and just like personal pride, misused national pride can destroy a nation...

The context of today's first reading is that the people of God are settling back in the land after leaving Egypt. But the people start to become proud, and they start to worship idols. They are placing too much emphasis on a created statue and on themselves, and not giving due credit to the living God, who rescued them from slavery... As a result, God's people are invaded by the Canaanites, who make their lives miserable. Disobedience to God has painful real-world consequences against the nation...

National pride and national sin are not just dangers for nations long ago. A few weeks ago I read Nehemiah 9, where Nehemiah confesses not only his *own* sin, but the sin of the nation, and he repents, with a powerful and deep repentance... What might happen spiritually, if a Canadian political leader confessed not only his or her own sin, but the sins of the *nation* – acknowledging our spiritual pride or smugness that we aren't like the U.S.A., or our ravenous over-consumption of the planet's resources, and our self-indulgences as a nation when so many citizens near and around the world do not have clean drinking water, food, or basic sanitation?... What would happen, do you think, if we confessed our national pride?...

Not that Canada is worse or better than many others. Worldwide, China is self-asserting in troubling ways. Zionism and anti-Jewish statehood in Israel and the Palestinian territories have haunted that region for decades. Ethnic cleansing is on the rise. What does *God* think of this?... And what about leadership in the U.S.A. right now?... It's a complex situation, but are there elements of personal pride and national pride at work?... I believe there are... Historically, from ancient Rome and other ancient kingdoms, up to today, God as well as people has a hand in taking down the proud... This should lead us to humility, repentance, and a renewed zeal for God's kingdom and love...

May we see ourselves, and others, from God's perspective, no more or less or different. May we move, individually and as nations, from self-centredness to humble, joyful praise... Thanks be to God...