

Pride. Magdalen College Chapel Sunday 1st May 2016

There's a useful little tome, readily available from all good bookshops, or more cheaply from Amazon, called 'The Travellers' Guide to Hell.' In it, under the heading 'Pride', you'll find the following description: *'The mother of all sins; the thin line between righteousness and self-righteousness.'*

To talk about any one of the seven deadly sins is to take cautious steps upon very thin ice....for a whole raft of reasons. For a start, what you and I consider to be implied by any one of these sins will almost certainly vary widely and there is also an underlying, often rather uncomfortable sense that every one of them is to some degree, so far from being shun-worthy, on the contrary, very attractive and rather desirable. And that reaction, we instinctively feel, is the wrong reaction to have. These sins are, after all, called 'deadly' for probably very good reasons, reasons which suggest that they are none of them to be trifled with. But, more importantly, they are all keyholes, so to speak, through which we may be led into greater depths and complexities of sin.

Is it possible, I wonder, to have an ascending order of deadliness with these sins? A sort of 'league-table'? Is Pride, for instance, a deadlier sin than 'Gluttony' or 'Sloth'? Dante thought so, and put Pride way down on the lowest level of Purgatory, with souls staggering under the weight of massive stones on their backs, struggling to come to terms with the heaviness of their sin. It was considered the gravest of the sins, since it was through Pride that humankind encountered the other sins. Eve, when offered the apple, unable to resist its beauty, sees that it is good to taste and a delight to the eyes, and falls. It is Pride, together, possibly, with Gluttony, that trips her up; an over-stretched sense of her own importance and a belief that the apple will elevate her to the level of God, so that she understands all things. And indeed, it was the cause too of the serpent's fall, Lucifer, whose own fault was to consider himself to be God's equal, and to challenge him, and so precipitated his own destruction. St Augustine: *'It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.'*

The desirability of toying with what is catalogued as a sin is often a temptation of overwhelming power, often because of its extreme attractiveness and often because we don't take into account the slipperiness of the slope. If we regard sin as something that cuts us off from the love of God, then the more we embrace it, the further we distance ourselves from God.

Pride is a complex subject. It can so very easily be regarded as a virtue. How often are we exhorted to be proud of our heritage, to take pride in our work, in our appearance, our achievements? Is it not an infinitely worthier reaction to hold our head up high, rejoicing in our own abilities, be they academic, sporting, artistic, or whatever, than to hang our head and droop our shoulders with a self-deprecating shrug, and a murmur of 'Oh, really, it's nothing.'

But marry up Pride with Arrogance or Vainglory, and you're in very different territory. It is beguilingly attractive, as the Psalmist discovered in Psalm 73. 'For I was envious of the arrogant ('foolish' in the KJV), I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pain, their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people. Therefore their pride is like a necklace ('chain' in the KJV); violence covers them like a garment.' The apparent health and wealth of the outwardly confident, those who wear their pride as a glamorous and visible varnish, is something to be desired. But varnish it is, and scratch it and you'll often

encounter someone of great insecurity and vulnerability, someone who has to convince themselves of their security and well-being, because, given the chance to explore, they recognise that they are in reality a mass of anxieties and confusion. That's, of course, vastly to over-simplify. Nothing is so evidently black and white. Continue the image a little bit, and the allure of pride begins to lose some of its glamour. Your necklace of pride can become an albatross, a mill-stone, and the result of that is deadly – hence a Deadly Sin.

Further, it is one of the more insidious of the Seven Deadly Sins, partly because it's something that we are, rather than something that we do. The satisfying of Lust, for example, calls for action, the satisfying of Gluttony calls for action, the same with Avarice and the same with Wrath. Sloth, conversely, usually calls for inaction, but Pride is internal, part of our personal DNA. We wear it all the time, unless we present ourselves as Uriah Heep, 'ever so 'umble', in which case we are monumentally deluded.

The proud, so often referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures and those with 'stiff necks' are invariably labelled as failing in humanity as well as in humility. And their outcome is often gruesomely fatal. Their fault is not only that they distance themselves from God, but that, in their own eyes, they have no need of God. And that's where things can start to go very wrong. *'Inordinate self-love is the cause of every sin. The root of pride is found in man not being, in some way, subject to God and his rule.'* Thomas Aquinas.

Last Thursday the choir sang these words in Psalm 138. 'For though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: as for the proud, he beholdeth them afar off.' This 'afar off', I suspect is not a distance imposed upon us by God, but one that is imposed upon us by ourselves, though our own thoughts and perhaps through our own actions as well. God longs to embrace us, to keep us close to Him, but that entirely depends on how we choose to play this game. It is our choice; we can acknowledge our need for Him, or we can turn away and walk. Are we drawn to righteousness or to self-righteousness? It's up to us.

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