28th February 2010
Trinity College

Some Vices and Virtues: Pride
Genesis 4, 1-12 and Philippians 2, 3-13

Picture, if you will, the following notice:

The University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

The University Sermon for Sunday 3rd March, 1974

Sir Kenneth Wheare, Fellow of All Souls, sometime Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford and Rector of Exeter College, Hon Fellow of Exeter College, Nuffield College, Oriel College, University College and Wolfson College; CMG, KBE, FBA, D. Litt (Oxon), Hon. D. Litt (Columbia, Exeter, Liverpool, Manchester and Cambridge), etc.

On the sin of pride

Oxford University, as you may guess, has some fun with this annual endowed sermon, as with another annual sermon on the grace of humility. The Heads of Colleges appoint the preacher, and have been known, it has to be said, to take delight in appointing not someone who might be thought to exemplify humility, or to have no truck with pride, but someone rather, who might be thought to be in particular need of the virtue, or to have something of an excess of the vice in question. I am sure that Sir Kenneth Wheare was not chosen with such intent, but a notice announcing a sermon on the grace of humility by the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (aka Lord Dacre), for example, was the result of such donnish mischief and cause of much donnish mirth.

Ah well, simple pleasures one might think - but St Augustine would have taken a dim view of Oxford, in general of course, but on this point in particular. He would have insisted that pride is really no laughing matter. For although Augustine did not use the particular phrase, he regarded pride as one of what would later be called the deadly sins (those sins which not only harm others, but are, so to speak, forms of self-harm.) Or rather, not one of those sins, but the chief amongst them. The most deadly of the deadly. Pride, he came to believe, is the primal sin, to which one can trace the woes of the world.

Now I suspect that what I have just said about Augustine may come as a surprise to some of you - not his taking a dim view of the University of Oxford which is only what one would expect, but rather about his thinking that pride is <u>the</u> sin. For some reason, if one

mentions Augustine and sin, most people seem to think immediately of sex. Well, Augustine did write on sex, but he is really not very interested in it.[1] The fact is, I suspect, that modern readers of Augustine, especially of his Confessions, are themselves rather preoccupied with sex, and since this is what really interests them, assume that it is what really interests him. But it doesn't. As his great modern biographer Peter Brown puts it – he 'treats [his sexual sins] as not very important: in his eyes they paled into insignificance before a single act of vandalism' – '[t]he pointless robbing of a pear-tree.'[2]

Small boys growing up in small villages in North Africa 1600 years ago, were very like small boys growing up anywhere else, it seems – and Augustine was part of a gang which delighted in getting up to mischief. Now 'there was', he tells us, 'a pear-tree on a plot near our vineyard . . . We had been playing in the fields long after night had fallen, as was our . . . habit. Off we went to shake down the fruit and carry it away: we filched great loads of pears, not to eat, but just to throw at pigs.'[3]

Oliver Wendell Holmes in a letter to Harold Laski in 1934 wrote: 'Rum thing to see a man making a mountain out of robbing a pear tree in his teens.' Well, it's a droll remark, but silly for all that. For Augustine was not making a 'mountain out of robbing a pear tree'. It is rather that he came to think this one, in its way, perfectly trivial incident, revelatory of the deep human motivations he sought to fathom – all the more revelatory indeed because of its triviality.

Augustine's intellectual quest was driven by a question about the origin of evil. What fascinated Augustine in the robbing of the pear tree was just the very mysteriousness of the act's origin, since it lacked any obviously compelling motive. Contrast this with his sexual sins. Augustine didn't need to sit scratching his head wondering why a young man (such as Augustine himself), pursuing a career in politics and not yet in a position to make an advantageous marriage, would, in the meantime, take a mistress as a temporary expedient. That is hardly one of the great mysteries of human existence. (If there is anyone here who

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[1] He writes on one occasion that his 'African readers tended to think that a boy was innocent until he reached puberty: "as if" Augustine once said, "the only sins you could commit were those in which you use your genitals."

[2] P. Brown, Augustine, 172.

[3] Confessions, II, iv, 9.

does find it puzzling, I'm happy to provide names and addresses of various monastic orders after the service.)

But the 'gratuitous act of crime', as he referred to the taking of the pears, is mysterious. He wasn't hungry, the pears weren't very nice, and if he and his mates had wanted some fruit, they could have bought some. So why did they do it?

Pears are not apples, of course, but Augustine found an echo here of the sin of Adam and Eve. Why did Eve pick that apple in the garden? This is altogether mysterious too. They can't have been hungry; they had trees of all kinds at their disposal, with permission to eat of them all. The command not to eat of one tree (the only command they received), was thus a command not in the least burdensome. And yet they did pick the apple.

Why? Why pick apples – when you can have grapes or figs or mangoes or whatever? Why pick pears when they are only fit to be thrown to pigs? Augustine came to think that the best explanation for these otherwise gratuitous, wanton, acts, lay in pride. The command to Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree caused them no inconvenience – what pained them was that they were subject to any command at all, no matter how inconsequential. They breached the command, then, for the simple reason that it was a command. It reminded them, by its very existence, that they were not gods. The command was an affront to their pride. They rebelled against it not for any obvious reason, but wantonly and gratuitously – simply for the hell of it, as we rather aptly say.

But remember that if this is the first sin in the bible, the second is no less puzzling. Cain murders Abel – again for no very obvious reason. The text is laconic to a degree – 'Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him'. It really doesn't give us any clear why or wherefore. And yet the deed is done. And Augustine – who liked patterns – saw in the story of the murderous Cain and Abel the very same motive which had turned humans against God, now turning humans against fellow human. If it was intolerable to Adam that he should be subject to God, even when this subjection was light as a feather, then so too it is intolerable to Cain that he should be subject to Abel in the sense that they must indeed, be subject to one another, if they are to live alongside one another in fellowship and equality. If Adam would be damned, as we say, rather than live under God, Cain would certainly rather be double damned than live alongside his brother. Adam must dispose of God, because God reminds that he is but a man; Cain must dispose of Abel, because Abel reminds him that he is but a man alongside other men. In pride, Adam wills to be lord over God, as Cain, in pride,

wills to be lord over other men. In both cases the other is a threat to self and the self chooses to be alone.

Now remember that I mentioned that pride was for Augustine what would come to be termed a deadly sin – sins which harm others, to be sure, but which are also forms of self-harm. Now to be proud in the way of Adam and Cain – to repudiate the lordship of God and the possibility of fellowship with others – carries its very own punishment. For to place oneself above and beyond all judgment but one's own, is to embrace a radical loneliness which approaches madness. The proud, in the way of their pride, must be alienated, isolated, deprived of the possibility of relationship – the only voices and judgments they can bear to hear are their own. And in this solitary confinement of their own choosing, they can have no share in the shared life which properly belongs to human beings. Paradoxically, then, the proud, thinking of themselves as greater selves, end up as lesser selves, cut off from the relationships in which they might have realized themselves more fully. Like Cain, they must wander the earth alone.

A quick footnote: when Augustine is in full flow in denouncing pride, even ending up praising 'contempt for the self', he is in danger of being misunderstood. He would not have denied that certain forms of pride are good – it is a good thing to take pride in work well done, for example. Someone who takes no pride in such things has lost the self respect which derives from a critical attitude to the self, and the loss of a critical attitude to the self is a route to idleness and other forms of depravity. But the pride which Augustine identifies is not this pride, it is not a pride arising from proper self-criticism, but a pride which has abandoned such criticism. It is the pride not of an occasional judgment of the self, but the radical and primal pride of everyman which tempts us to place the self above and beyond such judgment and criticism.

Well that is all very well, but a preacher on sin can no more end a sermon with a mere diagnosis than a GP can end a consultation with a list of symptoms. It is all very well to identify a sin and say it is a sin, but what about its treatment?

As Augustine once said – the way of redemption is 'first humility, second, humility, third, humility.' But of course, that doesn't immediately help. On the face of it, this is about as useful as a GP who diagnoses high blood pressure as a result of stress, and tells you that you that the answer is to be unstressed. Sure enough if you are diagnosed as proud, you might infer that you stand in need of a dose of humility – but how do you get it?

St Benedict knew a thing or two about these matters. The longest chapter in his Rule is concerned with commending humility, but the most detailed, extensive and practical instructions in that same Rule are all about worship. What is the connection? The answer is that worship is, if you like, humility in practice – it is the form of life which arises from and expresses a proper understanding of the human condition.

In worship we locate ourselves, vertically and horizontally, in a right relationship. Vertically, we place ourselves under God – for in our worship we confess that we are indeed creatures and not gods. Horizontally, we place ourselves side by side, alongside one another, praying together, singing together – in solidarity, in fellowship, engaged in that shared enterprise which is human life, properly lived.

To be truly human is not be a man reaching up to be a god over God and other men, but to be one who knows himself to be below and alongside. But this is so hard for us that, as our second reading reminded us, it takes one who was in the form of God to teach us a better way. Pride is a deadly and ever tempting vice. It separates us from others and destines us to the loneliness of those who can live neither under God nor alongside each other but only alone. Worship invites us to practice what our egoistic hearts deny – and for the sake of others, but also for the sake of ourselves, it is good that we keep practicing.

Michael Banner
Trinity College