

Trinity College Cambridge
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The Seven Deadly Sins – Pride
Genesis 3: 8–19 Matthew 5: 1–16

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The great conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham once remarked that one should ‘try everything once, except incest and folk-dancing.’ And although not by nature a betting man, I’d wager quite a lot of money that there is no one in this Chapel this evening who has not sampled certain elements of every one of the seven sins catalogued as deadly. A bit like an effective vaccination, to realize the full effects of the immunisation process, one has, I understand, to be exposed to a minute sample of the virus, after which one’s own immunity system is supposed to kick in and provide protection from the worst effects of the disease. But without that initial exposure, your body has no clue what it is that it’s supposed to be avoiding. As a theological parallel, this holds very little water, and is hardly persuasive. Nevertheless, I believe it is true to say that, granted the smallpox virus, say, may have little going for it in terms of social clout, all seven of the deadly sins could perhaps have embryonic elements of good in them.

Pride. Theologians throughout the centuries have argued that pride was the greatest of all the deadly sins, possibly the *original* sin. It began even before the creation of the Garden of Eden. It was Lucifer who, convinced that his magnificence and splendour were self-generated, and unconnected to God, concluded that he no longer therefore had need of God, and, as a consequence of this emerging pride, fell. The continuing tragedy as far as he was concerned was that he was unable or unwilling to recognize his pride for the separating and deluding power that it was, and so the isolation from God remains. That must contain at least some element of the meaning of hell.

If pride comes before a fall, was it pride that came before *the* fall? And if pride was the cause of original sin, that sin perpetrated by Adam and Eve, is that not reason enough to label it as the worst of all the sins? It was Lucifer, in the form the unrepentant serpent, who sidled up to Eve who was no doubt pottering diligently about this garden, and, like Hamlet’s uncle Claudius, poured the poison of rebellion into her innocent ear. And it is the work of but a moment to persuade Adam that he, too, had to taste the apple. And then, of course, all hell is let loose. By believing that he had the opportunity to acquire the status of God, he convinced himself that he would have no further need for God, since there was nothing further to be learnt, and by so doing spectacularly severs all the connections that linked him, through the goodness, the generosity and the grace of God, to his creator. And once that’s done, there’s no going back. Like someone else, several thousand years later, he thought it not robbery to be equal with God, only the ingredients of his intentions were very different. There is a small but disturbing detail in one of the windows in King’s

Chapel that depicts the temptation in the Garden, with the serpent, seductively coiled around the Tree of Knowledge, represented unmistakably as a woman. It is more a depressing indication of the proud attitude of some men in the 16th century than a satisfactory contemporary comment about women in general, but when we consider the fuss engendered in recent history by the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood, and now of the ordination of women to the episcopate, one could be forgiven for wondering whether much of any significance has changed in the last five centuries.

I feel sorry for Adam – I feel sorry for Eve too. So much blame is laid at their feet. Yet a quick scan through the Old Testament will reveal other *dramatis personae* who display shocking levels of pride which often lead to downfalls. It is usually people in positions of great power who convince themselves that there need be no limit to their spheres of influence. Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Naaman, any number of Pharaohs, Saul, Herod in the New Testament and so on. But coupled to their outward appearance of extreme arrogance and pride is almost always a degree of vulnerability, and you don't often have to dig too deeply to encounter it. It's this vulnerability and hidden sense of insecurity that starts the rot.

It is what the psalmist describes as the 'prosperity of the wicked'. Outwardly they may not be troubled as other, less powerful and influential people are, but they are imprisoned by their sense of pride. 'Pride compasseth them about as a chain, and violence covereth them as a garment.' There is an idea of suffocation here, as though those affected are powerless to fight against the constricting consequences of pride.

'Other vices flee from God; pride alone withstands him.' Aquinas quoting Boethius. This does not mean that the proud are invariably courageous. Frequently one finds that the proud, be they politicians, tyrants, people in positions of power and authority will use henchmen to do their dirty work for them. But it is perhaps true to some extent to say that pride does not, like other vices, seek to live in the shadows; rather it often seeks the limelight. I spent many years working as an opera-singer and encountered divas, both female and male, who on occasions displayed frightening levels of pride and arrogance in their working lives. But on reflection, it was almost always the case that this pride was founded on a real sense of fear that they could not rely on themselves to live up to their own expectations, or the expectations of their colleagues, and as a result, they hid behind a protective wall of apparent complacency, seeming to be proud, when in reality they were simply frightened.

Mark you, one doesn't have to go to Covent Garden to come up against the carapace of pride presented by 22-carat divas. Poke around any senior combination room of any college in any university, and you will assuredly discover those members of the academic community who appear not to be, what you might call, inconvenienced by self-doubt. But again, dig a little deeper, and this veneer of pride is soon seen to conceal, albeit, not necessarily always effectively, layer upon layer of anxiety. We are all human, and, for the most part, we wear our vulnerabilities and our anxieties lightly. It's when we don't that we should start to get worried.

It is easy to look upon the lives and works of the proud, and perhaps to envy them their lot. They are the ones whose lives seem to be secure, enjoyable, easy to manage. The prophet Malachi recognizes the complaints uttered by the people against God. 'And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.' However, we are soon reassured that, whatever the ease of their current circumstances, their confidence is ill-timed, and their future is anything but comfortable. 'For, behold,' continues the prophet, 'the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.' It is scarcely a cosy image.

And the antidote to the sin of pride? Humility, though may God preserve us from the 'ever so 'umble' Uriah Heeps of this world. Crooked and manipulative, hypocritical and cynical, the self-proclaimed humble writhe, Gollum-like, and seek to gain their own ends by whatever means they can. At least the proud are usually disposed to play above board, even if it is because they don't care what other people think of them, and consequently have no need for subterfuge. But that cannot be what is meant by the antidote to pride. 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,' we read. Like other people commended in the Beatitudes, the meek can be represented as simply passive. I believe this is a misconception. The essence of meekness, humility is not the same as lying down and waving all four paws in the air. Humility demands strength of mind and of purpose, courage and determination; it is anything but passive.

So what positive, if anything, can be said of pride? Is it only and always a negative influence? I think not. 'The pride of the peacock is the glory of God'. Pride can instil a level of dignity, a sense of self-worth, a grounding in things that are of value. Like gluttony, lust, greed and perhaps to a limited extent, sloth, pride is an emotion from which we should not always remain superior and aloof. For one thing, it's most unlikely that we will ever find ourselves so emotionally frozen that we never experience these things. That is not to say, of course, that we should wallow in all such experiences, but if gluttony springs from an initial appreciation of good food, lust from a delight in the human form, and greed from a worthy desire to improve our lot, then pride may well be engendered by an initial sense of dignity. And there's not a lot wrong with that, when all is said and done. It's when they become warped by excess or when we become blinded by a desire for self-gratification at whatever cost, that things are inclined to wobble out of control.

We all have much in our lives of which we can and should be proud. It may be as a result of circumstance, of good fortune, of sheer hard work. The very fact that we are able to live and to study in a place like this is something of which we can be justifiably proud, and for which we should be eternally grateful. I remember one evening in October 1967 when I walked into this Chapel to sing my first evensong as a newly elected choral scholar; I thought my undergraduate breast would burst with pride – albeit tempered with quivering anxiety, as I was, and still am, rubbish at sight-reading, and God only knows what I had to be proud of – I'd flunked the audition and my A-levels were appalling. I can only assume that the other people auditioning were even worse. Pride notwithstanding, it didn't take long for me to find myself well and truly scattered in the imagination of my heart, as vocally and academically I slammed into reality. It's encouraging to read in James' epistle that

'God resisteth the proud'. James does not say that God destroys the proud, but rather by resisting the proud, offers alternative paths of redemption that can apply the brakes in any number of more or less dramatic ways.

So, finally, where lies redemption? I saw an astonishing fresco about two weeks ago, painted by an anonymous artist, a contemporary of Giotto, in a church by the old city walls of Istanbul. In it Christ is shown trampling down the gates of hell, scattering locks and bolts about him, Satan lying bound at his feet, and wrenching both Adam and Eve, whose pride effectively initiated the Fall, from their coffins. It is a work of overwhelming and dramatic power. But what makes it so startling is that Jesus is not simply offering his hands to help them out, for them to choose whether they take them or not, but has grasped both by the wrist, so that the initiative of redemption is not taken by either of them, but by Jesus himself. He is in complete control and it is a restoration of the sense of their self-worth and rightful pride, something for which we should strive and recognize for the God-given gift that it is. May we be given such strength!