

## **Fully Alive – Pride**

Set in the 1930's, the novel *Glittering Images* by Susan Howatch, follows the unravelling of the Reverend Dr Charles Ashworth. Ashworth is employed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to investigate rumours surrounding the personal life of a prominent Bishop, to protect the Church from scandal. As he gets entangled in the bishop's public and private lives, the inner turmoil with his own 'glittering image' comes into stark relief. He is a man who, even unbeknownst to himself, is carefully controlling his glittering image, lest anyone sees the true self beneath.

This temptation to project a glittering image to the world is uncomfortably familiar to all of us, even if not so blatant as it is in this book. This morning we are looking at pride, which often gets packaged with vainglory in lists of the seven "deadly sins;" those well-worn paths of the human soul that lead us away from the flourishing and fullness of life that Jesus offers us.

### **What is the sin of "pride"?**

There is need to define what we mean when we talk about pride as sin. After speaking at the local Waitangi event, a parishioner came up and said, "Is it okay to say that I am proud of you and St Georges?" The answer is yes! When we talk about pride as sin, we are not talking about a delight or satisfaction in one's mastery or delight in the mastery of children or others, nor a sense of one's own dignity, worth or self-respect (or that of our communities). We might call these 'belovedness.'

The sin of pride is having an over-high opinion of oneself, exaggerated self-esteem or conceit. It is placing ourselves at the centre of the universe, everyone else just bit-parts in my drama (or NPCs as the kids say). It is the human propensity to go it alone. As Josh outlined last week, all sin is relational. We are made for relationship, and as Augustine put it sin is a human turned in on themselves. We are meant to grow outward in interdependent relationship, yet sin wants to burrow inward. Timothy Keller put it this way: "Spiritual pride is the illusion that we are competent to run our own lives, achieve our own sense of self-worth and find a purpose big enough to give us meaning in life *without God*." And I would add, without the need for others, and so we insulate ourselves from needing or being needed. This inward burrowing is the opposite of the full relational life Jesus wants for us.

### **Pride and (False) Humility**

Now, most of us are not obviously arrogant and self-assured, so do we have to worry about pride then? Pride is not always self-confidence; it can come from and cover deep insecurities. In fact, given New Zealand's tall poppy syndrome and self-effacing nature, the temptation for many of us is to nurse a more twisted form of pride that masquerades as a false humility. This insecure pride can be a personal bondage. I've shared before how despite growing up in the Hawke's Bay with older brothers who surfed, I never learnt because I didn't want to be seen to be incompetent. Which is absurd,

everyone must start somewhere. My pride stole from me the simple enjoyment of the activity for its own sake. Out of fear of my ego being deflated, I was unable to forget myself (what I thought others might think) and simply show up in the surf to enjoy the ocean and waves. I was observing myself through how I thought others would see me, and I didn't measure up to the glittering image I was projecting. I robbed myself of life's fullness to protect a fragile ego.

### **Identity in Christ as the Ground of Freedom (Philippians 2:1-8)**

So what breaks grip of pride? What frees us from our glittering images? Paul's answer in Philippians 2:1 is this: *if you have any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and compassion...* These "ifs" are asking a big question: is your sense of worth found in God's love? You cannot add anything more to your identity than this! Our self-worth ultimately comes from God, who has pledged to be faithful, even to the end of the world. Do we trust that God wants to fill us with the full-ness of his joy and presence and life as Jesus promised? John 16 - God wants to fill us with his Holy Spirit and joy, but when we are proud, we are already full of ourselves. There's no room for God.

Once our identity is assured, Paul can then say: "Therefore, do nothing out of self-ambition or empty pride." *Kenodoxia*. Vainglory. It is vain because you cannot add anything to the glory God is bestows upon you. Given the worth you have received, you can be free to consider others more important than yourselves. You no longer need to maintain "main character energy" as the kids say.

*V 5: In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.* The mind of one who did not treat equality with God as something to be clutched but emptied himself. Took the form of a servant. Not out of low self-esteem but because he was so secure in his identity that he could forget himself. Paul's command to "consider others better than yourselves" is not an invitation to false humility or denial of our own worth. It is the consequence of receiving your identity from somewhere secure enough that you no longer need to defend it. You are free to listen, to make space, to fully attend to who is in front of you. Pride costs us the capacity to be genuinely present to another person. When we are managing our image, we are not really listening. We are trying to tie everything the other person says back to our own experiences. True healing attention to others is only possible from a self that is not under threat.

Humility is often paired as the counter virtue of pride. There's truth in that. Many of you will know C.S. Lewis' line: "Humility is not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less." But humility can be faked, it can become another spiritual performance, an aspect of the glittering image. Like the Pharisee in the gospel reading, we find our self-worth in subtle games of comparison. The deeper counter virtue is fidelity: being true to God who is faithful to us, to one another, and to the reality of

who we are. Fidelity is relational by nature. It is found only in the commitments we keep to God, to the people in front of us, and to the truth of our own selves. True humility is a side effect of service, of love, of giving ourselves to others. Pride's natural enemy, as we see in the tax collector, is bare honesty before God and others.

### **The Danger of Spiritual Pride (Luke 18:9–14)**

Jesus' parable was directed to a group of people who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. Unfortunately, pride doesn't disappear when we become serious about faith. It can be harder to detect. For the Pharisee, his religious performance was the ground of his standing before God. Therefore, the performance must constantly be monitored and maintained. Comparison is a core way we do this: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men."

Parables are exaggerations of course. But can you recognise subtle forms of this prayer in your own life? I can. I can recognise that attitude in all the subtle ways my faith, belief and practices have been conscripted into the service of my glittering image. The very practices meant to open us toward God can become the means of building our self-worth. Cornelius Plantinga wrote: **“repentant sinners need to repent even of some dimensions of their repentance, such as their pride in the humility that drove them to their knees.”** Are there ways, however subtle, where you think your way of being a Christian is better than others?

The tax collector does only one thing: he tells the truth of who he is before the one who already knows. Both men need a verdict. The difference between them is the question of *whose verdict they need*. The Pharisee is maintaining the glittering image and must offer the verdict himself. The tax collector has given up the game. He confesses. To become whole, we must become “fierce with reality” to quote Parker J. Palmer: “There are no shortcuts to wholeness. The only way to become whole is to put our arms lovingly around everything we know ourselves to be: self-serving and generous, spiteful and compassionate, cowardly and courageous, treacherous and trust-worthy. We must be able to say to ourselves and the world at large, ‘I am all of the above.’”

### **Bringing the Real I into the Light**

So how do we do this? I am a big believer in the power of confession. Not just a general confession that we do on a Sunday together, but also personal confession, spoken to another person we trust who can represent Christ's grace, mercy and acceptance to us.

Returning to the novel *Glittering Images*, true healing comes in confession. As the protagonist's life unravels, he arrives at door of a monastery in pieces. Drunk, vomiting, unable to look in the mirror because he is afraid of the man he will see there. He is brought low by the cost of maintaining the

glittering image, which has become a jailor to his true self. He finds a confessor in the monk Darrow. Slowly, Darrow masterfully assures Charles that he can let down the image. Even in confession he keeps trying to manage what Darrow sees, to preserve some remnant of the glittering image. When he finally speaks the truth, he finds that he is not destroyed by being seen. He is relieved. Only what is brought into the light can be healed and made fully alive.

This is what confession does. Confession is *the act* of personal fidelity. We bring our full and true self to a brother or sister in Christ, often in great fear, and once confessed, we hear words to the effect of: “welcome to the human race!” I recently had the pleasure of offering this to a soul friend who’s moved to the other side of the planet. He’s ministering in a tradition that doesn’t do confession. He wanted to open up and share some things with someone who knew him deeply yet also able to hold this space where our inner darkness meets God’s grace and forgiveness. Confession is the act of being known whole, fully, and still find ourselves loved. It is bringing the worst of ourselves into the light, and finding ourselves met with grace and humour and understanding. We discover that we can stand before God, and with others community without the glittering image. The fully alive life begins in the freedom of being fully known.

### **Reflection**

- Where might you still, even subtly, be clutching for self-worth? (What’s your glittering image?)
- What’s one thing you could do this week to become more “fierce with reality”?
- Who is/could be the person you confessed all to, who do you allow to see the real you?

The fully alive life that Jesus offers is only available to the real I, not to our glittering image. May each of us receive the grace to lay it down.

Let us pray: *Healer, may we choose to embrace our limitations, our frustrations, our angst, our need, our insecurities, our lack, not as conditions to transcend but the perfect conditions through which you can transform our character, heal our souls, and make us whole. May you reveal the subtle ways pride lives in our thinking, even in the practice of our faith and our attempts at following in the footsteps of our Rabbi Jesus. And grant to us the freedom of self-forgetfulness. Amen.*