



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, September 2, 2007
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 14:1, 1-14
Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18
Hebrews 13:1-8
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SOCIAL CLIMBING

For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of the most distinctive features of Holy Scripture, running from the start of the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament, is the emphasis placed on pride and its converse, humility. Our lessons today, especially the passage from Ecclesiasticus (a frequently cited, long, book of wisdom from the Old Testament Apocrypha) and from St. Luke (Jesus' words on etiquette at the Pharisee's dinner party) are two good examples.

Jesus tells his fellow dinner guests in today's Gospel not to seek out the places of honor, but rather the lowest places; that way, they will not be embarrassed by being asked to give place to another guest, and they may be asked by the host to come up higher. The disorder of pride reveals itself not only in individuals but in groups, societies, nations. "Sovereignty passes from nation to nation (from group to group) on account of injustice and insolence and wealth," says Ecclesiasticus.

The reason pride is a disorder is that human beings do not wear it well. It comes across unattractively as arrogance, as though, in the words of the psalms, we are "swollen" with pride. It is not morbidity but sober realism that produces these words against pride: "How can he who is dust and ashes be proud? For even in life his bowels decay. A long illness baffles the physician. The king of today will die tomorrow. For when a man is dead, he will inherit creeping things, and wild beasts and worms."

By contrast, proper humility, modesty, is not a disorder. The constant refrain of the Old Testament is, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they do thereafter." The ancient Greeks had a similar maxim, when, for example, Socrates said the beginning of knowledge comes when we realize we know nothing. Then we can learn. The fear of the Lord means the awe, the reverence and the love of Almighty God; this is the first principle of life. Saint Thomas Aquinas observed that pride was first revealed when Lucifer attempted independently to set his throne on high, over against God. Humility, on the other hand, is not neurotic insecurity but rather sane realism.

In fact humility, arising from the knowledge and love and fear of God, is the soil in which genuine contentment and confidence can grow. Arrogance depends upon looking down on, excluding or using others to enhance oneself. Pride usually masks inner emptiness, insecurity, and bankruptcy, depending on exterior tangible, visible evidences for self-esteem. If you're not in my club or circle, and better yet, cannot get into it, this somehow props me up – so goes pride's reasoning. Whereas the humble person, having invested in such things as love, kindness, consideration, generosity, is rich in ways the arrogant person cannot possibly understand. In the words of today's Epistle, "We can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?" The devil and his minions were never able to understand the glory of God and his angels; because God himself is love, self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The humble person bears the image of his creator and redeemer; his life points to God.

Our world is full of people who have been hurt, abused and understandably lack self esteem. No wonder we have so many therapists, courses, books and methods offering help. Good therapy does not lead its clients towards self conceit, but rather towards what could be called "proper self-regard," which is unlike the sin of pride and really closer to the biblical virtue of authentic humility, exhibited supremely in Jesus. Sanity, spiritual and mental health, is to be found in the realization that I, we all, are made in the image of God and endowed with particular gifts; given our own place in the world; called to enjoy and exercise those gifts in fellowship with others. Healthy thinking realizes that we are not diminished by honoring others and exercising brotherly love. Love in fact expands, it does not contract, by being put into action and given away. Only pride and arrogance fear such expenditure, as though it meant losing something of some kind (like climbing down off a high horse). Here is some therapy from Jesus: "Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart; for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

To enter ever more deeply into health and to enjoy the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we might heed the words of the Rule of Saint Benedict which comments on today's Gospel. "The Scripture," he writes, "asserts that 'everyone that exalts himself will be humbled, and that humbles himself will be exalted'... If we want to attain to true humility and come quickly to the top of that heavenly ascent, to which we can only mount by lowliness in this present life, we must ascend by good works. We must erect the mystical ladder of Jacob, where angels ascending and descending appeared to him. Ascent and descent mean that we go downward when we exalt ourselves and rise when we are humbled. The ladder represents our life in this world, which our Lord erects to heaven when our heart is humbled."¹

Wherever we are on the scale of status, power, or wealth, this ladder is ours to climb. Our Lord warns that it harder for us if we do have the riches and power of this world, whose rules of climbing go in the opposite direction. But kings and rulers and rich people have followed Christ and climbed Jacob's ladder; with God it is possible. For all who attempt it, high and low, it is well worth the effort in terms of true self-regard, peace, contentment, joy of life.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT Volume III, Luke, p. 236.