

## Vainglory or True Glory

Readings: Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11.

Through the season of Lent we have been following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem and at the same time we have been on our own journeys as we have been allowing the Holy Spirit to confront us with the things we need to put off or die to in our own lives, particularly the so-called seven deadly sins. Today in our Bible readings we finally reach Jerusalem and we also come to the last of the seven deadly sins: vainglory.

Let's look at vainglory first and then we will come back to our Bible readings later. What do we mean by vainglory? Well, when we talk about giving glory to God we are talking about giving Him the recognition and honour that is due to Him because He is worthy of it. On the other hand, the 'vain' in vainglory refers to something that is empty or useless and worthless, so vainglory is about looking for recognition, wanting to be honoured or acknowledged but for the wrong things or in the wrong way. Like all the seven deadly sins it is taking something that is good and distorting it in some way.

So, vainglory can be defined as: 'the excessive and disordered desire for recognition and approval from others.' It's important that we hear the first bit: 'the excessive and disordered desire for recognition and approval,' so we are not talking about the basic human need which we all have to be accepted and loved by others, but one that is excessive. Ultimately, of course, that need can only be met by God. We need to keep on reminding ourselves and one another of how much God truly values and loves us – so much that He sent His only son to die for us. When we look at the cross we begin to get some idea of the depth of that love and to what lengths He will go to bring us back to himself.

But vainglory is about having such a need for other people's approval and acclaim that we will put every effort into getting it. We don't even mind if it is for something pretty trivial or even wrong. When St Augustine was a teenager he and his friends were hanging out with nothing much to do and getting bored so they decided to steal some pears from a nearby farm. They didn't really need the pears or even want them – they ended up throwing them to some pigs – they just took them for the fun of it. Years later when he was looking back on it Augustine knew that he wouldn't have done it on his own - he had done it to impress his friends. He didn't want to lose face and be seen as a wuss. How many youngsters today find themselves in a similar situation? And it's not only youngsters – how many of us have gone along with something a bit dodgy or failed to speak up when we should have done because we were worried about what people would think of us?

One way of summing up what we mean by vainglory is: 'image is everything.' It is being too concerned with our image – of what other people think of us. And vainglory is alive and well and flourishing in our society today. Advertising, the beauty and fashion industries are all built on our concern for our image. Look at any woman's magazine and you will see images of attractive celebrities, together with advice on how you too can achieve the same look for half the price (yeah, right!). In politics and businesses there are spin doctors whose job is to protect the party or company image and to go into 'damage control' mode when things go wrong, even if this sometimes means 'being economical with the truth.' It seems to be an ingrained part

of our culture, this need to always look good. It can easily creep into the Church as well: we can become performance orientated so that every service has to be a slick, seamless presentation; or we have to be seen to be 'successful,' however we define 'success.'

Vainglory is all about our image. It is easy to confuse it with pride and the two are certainly closely related. Here we are not talking about what we might call 'proper pride' the satisfaction that comes from hard won achievements, but about what happens when we allow this to develop into a distorted view of ourselves as being better than or superior to others. Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* brought out the difference between pride and vanity or vainglory rather well. She says: "Vanity and pride are different things. Pride relates to our opinion of ourselves; vanity to what we would have others think of us." So pride is concerned with our status, with being 'number one,' we have to succeed or excel in everything we do in order to feel good about ourselves. Vainglory is more concerned with our reputation – what others think of us – being seen to excel. Sometimes this can lead us to avoid doing things because we are afraid of failing and losing face, or even to cheat if it means we can look better than we really are.

So the proud person wants rave reviews for their outstanding performance. Vainglory just wants rave reviews. Glory-seekers want to be noticed; they want to impress even for trivial things. As we said at the beginning, the 'vain' in vainglory means something that is empty or worthless, so we can be consumed with the need to impress others even in ways that really are not that worthwhile such as having designer label clothes; driving a flash car; having the latest gadget; or doing stupid stuff and posting it on Youtube or whatever – just to get noticed!

Well, we may be sitting back and thinking "That's alright; I'm not worried about designer labels and all that stuff and I haven't got the money to spend on the latest gadgets or top-end cars and I don't post stuff on social media anyway - but there is a religious version of vainglory - it's called hypocrisy. As the book that we are using says: "Hypocrisy is the natural result of a heart sold out to vainglory." And Jesus came down really hard on this. If we turn on a couple of chapters from our gospel reading to Matthew 23 Jesus really lays into the Pharisees as hypocrites who do everything for show – for people to see (v5). He even pronounces seven woes on them, calling them whitewashed tombs (v27) a brood of vipers (v33) and in danger of going to hell! Pretty serious stuff.

Hopefully we are not like that - doing things because we like the public recognition, but it can be a danger, particularly for those of us who have more up-front roles. For all of us, though, it's nice to have our efforts acknowledged to get some appreciation for what we have done. And there's nothing wrong with that unless we are only doing it for the recognition.

But vainglory can be even more subtle. Concern for our image – for what other people think of us – can lead us to 'put on a show' for another reason - we may be acting out of fear. Deep down we don't really think we are good enough, so we have to pretend. Tragically, whether we are acting out of fear or out of an inflated sense of our own importance, vainglory distances us from other people. We can never let anyone get too close in case they discover the truth about us; we may even be

hiding from ourselves. But whether we are consciously trying to fool others or are using them to prop up our own egos we cannot build genuine relationships.

Part of our new vision statement is about building relationships and that will mean being part of a community in which we are loved and accepted for who we are so that we don't have to be so concerned about our image.

Putting up a front makes us feel fragile and hollow and it leaves our deep human need for acceptance unfulfilled and unsatisfied. Remember, the seven deadly sins are so called because they are the ones that are perversions of our deepest human needs – we try to manufacture our own satisfaction for ourselves rather than relying on God's provision, and so we fall prey to avarice, envy, sloth, anger, gluttony, lust and, of course, vainglory. We try to create our own image to present to other people rather than finding our sense of worth in God's acceptance of each one of us as His precious child created in His image.

What can we do about it? How can we turn from vainglory to true glory? Well, throughout this Lent series we have been looking at the new life that is ours in Christ and at how we are called to be conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. So now we need to turn back to our two Bible readings and look at the example that Jesus sets us.

Let's look at Matthew 21:1-11, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It was Passover time, one of the three great feasts that every Jewish man was expected to go to if he possibly could, and the women often went as well. Usually groups of people from the same town or village would travel up together. So Jesus and his disciples would have been with thousands of other pilgrims from Galilee all following the same route. Josephus, a Jewish writer reckoned that about 2½ to 3 million people descended on Jerusalem at Passover time. Imagine that – over half the population of NZ travelling to Wellington for a religious event!

Anyway, Jesus and his disciples and all the other pilgrims would have travelled up to Jerusalem from Jericho and as they came over the ridge of the Mount of Olives they would have caught their first sight of Jerusalem. But then Jesus deliberately does something odd. All pilgrims were expected to arrive on foot. Jesus, too, has walked all the way from Galilee, but now he asks his disciples to go to the next village and get a donkey for him to ride on. What is going on? I don't think it was because he was feeling tired or footsore. No, Jesus was making a very clear statement and the people with him, good Jews who knew their Old Testament very well, understood what he was up to. Matthew draws our attention to it in vv4-5 where he quotes from the prophet Zechariah: "See your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey." (Zech 9:9). So Jesus was definitely claiming to be coming as a king, and the people responded by waving branches, laying down their cloaks and singing one of the Hallel psalms [Pss 113-118] that were shouted antiphonally at the great festivals.

But there is a bit of a paradox here. Jesus is entering as a king but the prophecy from Zechariah 9:9 describes a king who is humble and peaceful, who rides a pack animal not the warhorse of a military leader. Jesus is deliberately not coming with a show of strength. The Jewish people were looking for a Messiah who would lead an uprising that would defeat the Romans and make them an independent nation again. But Jesus is saying – I'm not that sort of a king, and my kingdom isn't that sort of a

kingdom. By entering Jerusalem on a donkey Jesus shows that his kingship is one of humility and service.

In Mark 10:42-45 Jesus tells us that he came as one who serves, to give his life as a ransom for many. He is the Servant King. And in Matthew 11 :28-30: Jesus describes himself as “gentle and humble in heart.” As Paul says in Philippians, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross (Phil.2:8).

It is this attitude of humility that is the opposite of the vice of vainglory that we were looking at before. It was a virtue despised by the Romans and Greeks and it is not that popular in today’s culture either. Often it is misrepresented as a ‘Uriah Heep’ type of servility or a doormat mentality but in Philippians Paul tells us that it is about “considering others better than ourselves,” and “looking not only to our own interests but to the interests of others.” Do you see how vainglory is always focused on me, and what other people think of me, while humility is focused on others. This may mean something as simple as letting other people give their opinions or tell their stories without needing to chip in with our own story. It may mean acknowledging other peoples’ contributions to our achievements – a bit like an acceptance speech at the Oscars; it certainly involves acknowledging our dependence on God.

Joseph Pieper said this: “The ground of humility is man’s estimation of himself according to the truth. ... “To be humble is to value oneself according to the reality of one’s creatureliness and consequently to see oneself as one truly is; as a being who is constantly in need of divine grace.” Or as Peter says in 1 Peter 5:6 “Humble yourselves, therefore under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” Isn’t that just what Jesus did? He humbled himself; in the garden of Gethsemane he chose to submit to God’s will and he became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. That is true glory. And it is the way of the cross.

In her book “A Feast for Lent,” Delia Smith describes ‘taking up our cross’ and I think it summarizes some of the things we have been trying to do in our Lent series. She says: “Being willing to take up my cross means being prepared to take on the responsibility of facing my ‘very self.’ If I want to be a follower of Jesus I must allow his Spirit to reveal me to myself, I must stand in that light of self-revelation and be willing to renounce (with his help) everything that’s not in harmony with his will. We can flirt with the Christian message, we can try to find other routes of growth – but they will be cul-de-sacs, ... there’s only one road and that leads to Calvary and the cross.

Today we have been looking at vainglory and true glory; vainglory which focuses on ourselves and our need to measure up to what people expect of us; the effort it takes to manufacture and maintain our image, to look good. And true glory which recognizes that our true self-worth comes from knowing that we are loved and accepted by God and acknowledging our dependence on Him; so that we are then set free to focus on others; and to follow Jesus, the one who was obedient and humble in heart. Amen.