

The Dignity of the Human Person

*A Sermon preached on the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity (7th October 2012) in S. Mary the Virgin, Bourne Street by
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“The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage but
Looks on alike”¹

PERDITA’S defence in “The Winter’s Tale”, the late flowering of Shakespeare’s genius, when her love for Florizel, the King’s son, is discovered, and before it is known that she is herself the daughter of a king, is a classic articulation of the Judeo-Christian moral cosmology. As the sun shines on all, high and low, prince and peasant, privileged and dispossessed, rich and poor, so the love of God is indiscriminate in its universality. Distinctions of rank or status are irrelevant. Inequalities undoubtedly exist but they are irrelevant before the equality of the worth and value of each individual human person and human soul before God. “The dignity of the human person is rooted in his or her creation in the image and the likeness of God ... all human beings, in as much as they are created in the image of God, have the dignity of a person”.²

If we look into the Old Testament, there is a wealth of evidence to support that view. In its pages we see a clear recognition of the equal value and worth of all in the sight of God. Widows, orphans, aliens, the impoverished and dispossessed, the vulnerable and the outcasts are repeatedly the beneficiaries of divine injunctions. The clarion call of the prophets and the poetic pulse of the psalms are peppered with the likes of “He taketh up the simple out of the dust, and lifteth the poor out of the mire; That he may set him with the princes: even with the princes if his people”.³ Injustice and discrimination against the poor and the disadvantaged, the vulnerable and the outcast is seen as wronging God and wronging those victims by failing to recognise their inherent human worth and value.

The same can be seen, perhaps with grater clarity and precision in the New Testament. The kingdom that Christ seeks to inaugurate, the messianic imperative, is a kingdom of righteousness and justice. The Messiah as foretold would “deliver the poor ... he shall be favourable to the simple and needy: and shall preserve the souls of the poor”.⁴ We see precisely this in Christ’s words and actions: consorting with outcasts and sinners, touching and curing those considered unclean and beyond the pale, healing on the Sabbath, breaking with convention and the law grown sterile. All he did emphasised the intrinsic worth of all human beings, he embraced all with the love and mercy of God.

The intrinsic worth and value of human beings and human persons and its universal, indiscriminate application is clearly originated and rooted in our Judeo-Christian tradition. And it is important to make that point in the face of the new secularism. Without God and his indiscriminate, universal love, is there any satisfactory basis to accord equal worth and value to every human person, irrespective of moral lapses or sin and error? For Kant, for example, human dignity and human worth rely upon the capacity for rational choice: human reason is the only touchstone. But where does that

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale* 4 iv ll 446-448

² Catechism of the Catholic Church

³ Psalm 113: 6-7

⁴ Psalm 72: 12-13

leave infants, those born with or who succumb to mental impairment, those whose minds are occluded in the passing years? If they are incapable of rational choice, do they not become second-class citizens in such an ethical world and context? If rational choice is the criterion, it is surely not possible to explain why every human being, simply because they are human beings, should be regarded as having inherent worth and value.

Here, this morning's Gospel has something important to tell us. A clever Pharisee lawyer seeks to trap Our Lord with his seemingly innocuous question but, of course, Our Lord's answer is impeccable and radical. The greatest commandment is "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This the first and great commandment". But then he goes on immediately to link the divine and the heavenly with the human and the earthly. "The second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".⁵ It is the incarnational principle at the heart of the Christian Faith and the Oxford Movement.

The love and the worship of God in Trinity is essential to any Christian life, that nexus of love, that exchange of love between the Persons of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, is the animating principle of a Christian life. And its working out, its living out is seen in the love of neighbour. And who is our neighbour? In a Christian context it must be all those to whom we have a duty of care, but that, given the universal principle of love, must extend beyond an intimate circle or a geographically constrained proximity. Relationships are what matter, whether they be with those close or those far off. To enter any relationship requires a high degree of reciprocity and dependence and, therefore, vulnerability, simply by virtue of that shared proximity, if nothing else. In any relationship there must be an openness and willingness to share and exchange. Most relationships are not motivated by coldly rational calculations: there is something intrinsically inhuman in that. Love and friendship can defy purely rational categorisation. Relationships of love, neighbourliness and friendship require the abandonment of an austere, chilly autonomy for a degree of dependence, of need and the recognition of need in others. We reach out to others as they reach out to us, and that is common to humanity. Friendship and love go beyond the boundaries of rational powers and capacities.

Were we to take a fairly standard Darwinian view of human nature as a set of contingent features that have been shaped by evolution, or mutation, or the struggle for survival, then according inherent moral worth to human beings simply because they are human beings seems arbitrary and would tend to favour the survival of the fittest and the Devil take the hindmost.

But, by contrast, in a Christian moral universe, human beings, formed of the dust and returning to the dust, for all their frailty and fallibility are made in the image and likeness of God and that, of itself, invests them with an inherent worth and dignity. Simply by virtue of being human we participate in the infinite worth that is God. That is the revealed truth of the Incarnation; that is the sanctification and the divinisation of our humanity. By Christ humbling himself to take our bodily, earthly nature upon him, he has raised us up to a share in his divinity. This transforming fact is captured in a fragment by Gerard Manley Hopkins.⁶ Here he employs the name "Jack" to represent the common, the ordinary human. Jack is a "patch", a fool; he is a "potsherd", a broken fragment, yet all at once by Christ's sharing in our bodily nature that "Jack", that common humanity, becomes something of infinite worth and dignity:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and

⁵ S. Matthew 22: 35

⁶ Nature's Bonfire (That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire)

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,
Immortal diamond
Is immortal diamond.