

The Grace to Stand and the Humility to Kneel

Readings:

Jeremiah 14:7–10, 19–22 | Psalm 84:1–7 | 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18 | Luke 18:9–14

One Christmas Eve, two friends were wrapping presents when they decided to ask the Lord for just one spiritual gift they would love to be given for the coming year. After considering world peace, and all the usual Eden-esque requests, one asked for the gift of humility. The other friend stopped dead and said, ‘What? WHAT? Humility! I don’t want to be anywhere near you next year!’ For they understood that humility is neither delivered nor wrapped in sunbeams and fluffy clouds.

There is a certain irony to humility. It is the one virtue which, if we claim to possess it, we immediately prove that we do not. Humility is like grace: we only know we have received it when we stop striving for it.

Our readings today weave a single thread through the fabric of Scripture — from Jeremiah’s prayer, to the homesickness of the Psalmist, to the lonely perseverance of St Paul, and finally to the raw honesty of the tax collector in Jesus’ parable. At every point, the question is the same: what kind of posture does God honour? Is it the proud stance of the self-assured, or the bowed head of the contrite?

In Jesus, this question finds its answer — not in theory, but in flesh. The eternal Word does not merely *teach* humility; he *becomes* it. As St Paul writes elsewhere, “He humbled himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7). The entire life of Christ — from the manger to the cross — is the living out of today’s readings.

We began with Jeremiah’s lament rising from the cracked earth of drought — a landscape both ecological and spiritual. “Although our iniquities testify against us,” he pleads, “act, O Lord, for your name’s sake.” The prophet stands, trembling yet resolute, between a faithless people and a faithful God. He is both accuser and intercessor, holding before heaven the mirror of human sin yet the memory of divine mercy.

What is striking in this passage is not human repentance but *divine constancy*. Jeremiah does not attempt to persuade God of Israel’s worthiness; rather, he appeals to the unchanging character of God Himself: “*For your name’s sake.*” The nation’s hope rests not upon its virtue, but upon **God’s own fidelity**. The covenant will stand, not because Israel is good, *but because God is God*.

This is the same pattern we see in the ministry of Jesus, who never waits for humanity to become deserving before he acts. He dines with sinners, touches lepers, restores the unclean, calling disciples from among the unqualified. The incarnate Christ reveals God acting not in response to merit, but in the overflow of mercy.

Jeremiah's intercession foreshadows the tears of Christ over Jerusalem. Both weep for a people estranged from their God. Both bear witness to divine compassion that refuses abandonment. As Karl Barth reminds us, "The miracle of grace is not that God will not let us go, but that He *cannot*."

And so Jeremiah's lament becomes our own. For we too stand in a world thirsty for grace — nations dry with cynicism, souls parched by self-reliance.

Humanity is homesick for God; "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts," Psalm 24 rang, speaking to that deep human ache that Augustine captured when he confessed, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

In his second letter to Timothy, St Paul writes with the serene dignity of one who is coming to the end of his journey and is about to enter into his rest: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." But Paul's confidence is not in his own achievements; "The Lord stood by me," he says, "and gave me strength."

This is the same Lord who once stood by Peter as he sank, by Mary as she wept, and by a dying thief when he cried out for mercy from a cross. The same Jesus who refused to abandon others now refuses to abandon Paul – and will not abandon us, no matter our circumstances.

We see this in today's Gospel reading. In the parable, two men ascend the temple to pray, but only one descends justified. The Pharisee, armed with religious credentials, thanks God for his superiority; the tax collector, disarmed by truth, pleads only for mercy.

Here, Jesus offers not a moral lesson but a mirror. The Pharisee is the shadow of every believer who mistakes religion for righteousness when it is a relationship that we are being called into. The tax collector is the image of every sinner who dares to believe that grace is for them. And where do we see this paradox most vividly? On Calvary — where another sinner's prayer, "God, be merciful to me," finds its answer in the words, "Today you will be with me in paradise"

The Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware wrote, "The closer a person comes to God, the more aware they become of their own sin — not in despair, but in luminous humility." Just as that man did.

Jesus, who entered into our world to live and walk among us, revealing to us that **exaltation begins where humility meets divinity. It won't always be recognised here and now – not even within the church. But be assured, that Jesus knows, for God sees all.**

Unfortunately, humility is often mistaken for humiliation — a posture of self-deprecation or emotional abasement. But Christian humility is not about thinking less of ourselves; it is about thinking of ourselves less.

The One through whom all things were made submitting to the carpenter's bench. The One who called Lazarus from the tomb surrendering willingly to His own.

For the same Jesus who told a parable of mercy lived its fulfilment: he justified the humble by becoming humility itself. He took the lowest place — in a manger, on a cross, in a tomb — so that we might be lifted into glory. The God who hears the cry of the broken, who strengthens the weary apostle, who welcomes the homesick pilgrim; is the God who still bears the scars of *our* wounds.

For us, humility is found at the very moment of redemption - and in every ongoing moment of redemption throughout our lives as we grow into Christ's likeness, get back up after another fall, or return to a faith we had faded away from. In Jesus, we see that for the joy set before him, he endured the cross – bringing us back to St Paul who models this endurance in human form, fuelled by the Spirit of God. We too, are being called to endure, no matter how often we fall or falter.

What, then, does this mean for us?

First, it calls us to honesty in prayer. Jeremiah's candid intercession was answered in the nation's redemption, reminding us that the tax collector's cry — "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" — should be the lifelong refrain of the Christian. It is, in miniature, the whole Gospel: repentance met by mercy, humanity met by God.

Second, it calls us to endurance in vocation. The Christian life, as Paul reminds us, is not a sprint but a pilgrimage. Christ's own journey — from baptism to cross to empty tomb — will echo through our own: obedience, suffering, resurrection; oft repeated until that final resurrection ends all suffering, for all eternity.

Third, it calls us to mercy in community. If Jesus, the sinless one, shows no partiality, how can we? To kneel with the contrite, to lift up the weary, to welcome the outcast — this is to live in imitation of Christ.

Finally, it calls us to joy. True humility does not extinguish joy; it releases it. The one who kneels in repentance rises in resurrection. Our laughter, like the empty tomb, is proof that grace has had the last word.

I rather suspect that we are more often the tax collector than the Pharisee; the weary runner, not the conquering hero; the homesick pilgrim, not the settled saint. For grace is not the reward for the righteous; it is the resurrection of the humble.

So as we come before this Holy Feast in a few moments, we bow our heads as beloved children of our Holy and Loving Creator. No matter what life brings, let us rise

again, and again, and again, upheld by that same mercy that transformed a nation, justified the tax collector, strengthened the apostle, and set the psalmist's heart on a pilgrimage of joy to the House of God. May we Christians be known as a people scattering mercy abroad wherever we go and to whomever we meet.

For in the end — and indeed, from the very beginning — all is grace, and that grace will ever be found and outpoured in the person of Jesus Christ, to the Glory of God the Father, in the power of the Spirit and for the redemption of all creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.