

Well, in January 2018, there was a fierce debate in the pages of The Guardian about which was the best series of the popular TV comedy Blackadder. The original piece gave the *paper's* opinion about a *variety* of shows and no-one had objected to the idea that season 4 of Seinfeld is the best cos that is objectively and unarguably true – and if you've never seen Seinfeld, I heartily recommend it. It was originally broadcast between 1989 and 1998 and while it's obviously dated in some ways, in others, it would *still* seem ahead of its time if it was released now. And if you're looking for something good to binge on during lockdown, you could do no better...

But when the Guardian pronounced Blackadder goes forth – which was the fourth (and final) series, so nice little pun there – when they pronounced that the best, it generated a flurry of letters from passionate defenders of the merits of season *two*, the one with Miranda Richardson as Elizabeth the first and Stephen Fry as Lord Melchett.

Clearly nobody advocated for the first series which didn't have the benefit of Ben Elton's dialogue which is what *made* the show for me but I've always liked the *third* series too, the one set in Regency England in which Hugh Laurie plays the imbecile Prince George. And those six episodes were all titled in the style of Jane Austen novels: Dish and Dishonesty, Amy and Amiability, all of which is a *ridiculously* long-winded way of saying that if today's sermon had a title, it would be hubris and humility...

Because the line I want to pick up on from our second reading is verse 5b: God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Now Saint Peter's actually quoting the Book of *Proverbs* there, chapter 3 verse 34 which Saint *James* quotes in *his* letter as well, although the original is slightly different; that says 'Towards the *scorners*, He is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour'. And of course Jesus Himself said something very similar in Luke's Gospel: all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted. And in fact, Luke has Jesus say that twice, as the punchline or moral of two separate but thematically-similar stories...

So, in reverse order, in chapter 18, that saying follows the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. So the former says 'I thank you, O God, that I am not as other people. I say my prayers every day, give loads of money to charity. Aren't I fantastic?' Whereas the tax collector just hangs his head and says 'God have mercy on me a sinner'. And Jesus tells us to follow *his* example not the other guy's *because...* whoever exalts themselves will be humbled [and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted...]

Then in chapter 14 it follows *another* 'parable' and I use the air quotes because this is less a *story* (there was once a man who did whatever) and more a teaching point: imagine you're at a wedding. Don't sit in one of the good seats cos then you might face the humiliation of someone saying 'Sorry, mate, you can't sit there' and

having to get up and walk to the back with everyone looking at you, laughing. Far better to sit in the cheap seats and be *invited* to the front. And I've actually been on *both* sides of that scenario...

Terry Donovan – who featured in last week's sermon too. Hello again Terry – but he'll remember a meeting that we were both in, where I sat in what seemed like an appropriate place to me but then the person *running* the meeting came in and told me they wanted to sit where I was and made me *move*. And I did feel really humiliated – although to be honest, I think that reflects more badly on *them* than it does on me cos I would never do that to anyone, I hope...

But I thought of this parable after getting the job *here* cos at the end of my curacy (which for those unfamiliar with Anglican jargon is effectively your apprenticeship as a priest) I didn't feel ready to be a full-blown vicar, the head honcho somewhere, and all the jobs I applied for – and didn't get – before this one were as *associate* priests, working alongside someone else. *But* where *I* felt that I wasn't ready to be the boss, God clearly did! *And* I ended up as rector of not just one church but eight.

Of course some of you might think that *I* was right about my inadequacies and that God displayed a rare lapse of judgement on that occasion...

Now, what I've done there is clearly self-deprecation which is an essential tool in stand-up comedy which as most of you know is my second job. Because even though comedians have to be supremely

confident to get on stage in the first place and to win the audience's trust, you can't be *too* cocky cos nobody likes a show-off so even the best comedians put themselves down all the time. My favourite example of that being a friend of mine who started his set by saying 'I know you're supposed to use self-deprecation in comedy but I've tried it and I'm not very good at it...'

Of course, the difference is that comedians don't really mean it whereas Christians – and all religious or spiritual people – are expected to be genuinely humble. But is it actually *true* that God opposes the proud? Surely the boxer Muhammad Ali who was famed for his rampant narcissism and was always telling people that he was The Greatest, surely he had it right when he said 'I'm actually a nice guy. But I don't want anyone to know. Because I've found that humble people don't get very far in this life'.

And Ray Kroc, who turned McDonalds from a small family business into the multi-billion behemoth that it is today, would certainly agree with him. He once said 'It's ridiculous to call this an industry. It's not. It's rat eat rat, dog eat dog. If any of my competitors were drowning, I'd stick a hose in their mouth and turn on the water...'

And he knew whereof he spoke in that he basically *stole* the business from the McDonalds brothers of San Bernardino who were its true founders, a fascinating story that's brilliant told in the film *The Founder* starring Michael Keaton which is another one for you to add to your lockdown watchlist.

So, I think when Jesus said that the meek will inherit the earth, he meant in the next life, not this one. And indeed that section of Matthew's Gospel that we call the beatitudes, the various 'blessed are's, ends with Jesus saying 'Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great *in Heaven...*'

Now of course, there are benefits to living God's way *now* as well. As I said, *nobody* likes a show-off and there's that old adage about being nice to people on the way up cos you might meet the same people on the way down. But it seems to be an indisputable fact that some people get rich and famous, get to the top by stabbing others in the back and that they often get away with it – in this life at least. And while I would still want to live God's way even if there *wasn't* an afterlife, because God's ways are simply *better*; *and*, as most of you know, I don't believe in a place of *punishment* after death, I *do* think that the Christian life is supposed to be lived on the basis that it's what *God* thinks that matters, even if that costs us, and that one day any sacrifices we've made on His behalf will be worth it, we will reap what we have sown; our faith, our choices will be vindicated.

Which brings us to hubris. The opposite of humility. The most spectacular example of which was something that one of my Dad's friends said to me shortly after I started going to church. Because Henry (which is not his real name) was a militant atheist. And to be fair, I was in what you might call the honeymoon period of my faith where I was keen to tell anyone who wanted to listen – and many who

didn't – about the incredible change that had happened in my life and why it needed to happen in theirs too. And hey, I'm going to be doing the same tonight on my personal Facebook page, talking about how God came into my life and helped me quit drugs and alcohol 32 years ago today. But anyone who logs on to that has chosen to be there. Back then, I didn't know about boundaries. So maybe I'd put Henry's back up. But it was still quite breath-taking when he said, in all seriousness, 'I don't believe in God but if it turns that He *does* exist, I'm not worried about being *judged* by Him. Indeed, if He has any sense, He'll invite me to sit beside him and help judge everybody else because I have led a morally blameless life...'

True story. But like I say, I don't think that God will strike poor Henry down, I think he's more likely to laugh at him and that's why 'he is scornful towards the scorers' is probably a better translation than God *opposes* the proud because it seems to me that proud and ruthless people *are* running amok across the world and always have done and God doesn't seem to stop them. And favouring the humble doesn't necessarily mean intervening on their behalf. But I'd still rather have God's favour than succeed by clawing my way to the top. Which is why I'll never be a Bishop.

No, that's a joke. And in genuine humility, I know I haven't got what it takes to be a Bishop. And we should pray for ours, both Rose and Justin, in these challenging times. But a final word on hubris and humility: our hope of vindication in the next life should never become

a desire to see people like my dad's friend Henry or Ray Kroc  
*humiliated*, cut down to size, otherwise we're no better than the  
*Pharisee* saying 'I thank you O God that I am not as other people'.  
True humility says 'There but for the grace of God go I' and hopes  
and prays that everyone will come to appreciate the gracious love of  
God, ideally in this world and certainly in the world to come.