

Humility

- tapeinophrosunê appears in Greek for the first time in Paul's writings:

‘As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience’(Colossians 3:12).

‘I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’(Ephesians 4:1-3).

- The humility of which he speaks is the humility shown by Jesus:

‘In humility regard others as better than yourselves ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’(Philippians 2:3,5).

- The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, Whoever lowers himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’(Matthew 18:1-4).

• The noun is built up from tapeinophroneô, a verb which is found in the Greek OT in the following texts:

‘Pride will bring humiliation, but one who is humble of spirit will obtain honour’(Proverbs 29:23).

‘O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I am humble [this expression is not found in the Hebrew text] and have quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore’(Psalm 131).

In ordinary Greek usage outside the Bible 'being in a low state' is considered undesirable. To be reduced to such a state by people or by the gods is to suffer an evil fate. At the same time, since in relation to the gods one is necessarily 'low', to refuse to accept our lowly condition is to fall into the vice of pride. To accept one's low position in relation to the gods, and even in relation to other people when fate has so willed it, is considered sensible and virtuous.

Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus (all writing after Paul) use the word ‘tapeinophrosunê’, but never as a virtue, only as a vice. They meant by it being ‘small-minded’, ‘mean-spirited’. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem. The self held a central place in Greek ethics.

John Ruusbroec (1293-1381)

‘When, our eyes burnt with love, we consider in the depths of our soul the immensity of God ... then turn our gaze upon ourselves and count our crimes against the great and faithful Lord ... We fall into a strange astonishment, the astonishment of not being able to despise ourselves enough ... It is then that we resign ourselves to the will of God ... and, in this intimate abnegation, we find true peace, invincible and perfect, a peace that nothing will trouble. For we have been precipitated into such an abyss that no one will go there to seek us ...

John Ruusbroec (1293-1381)

Yet it seems to me that to be plunged in humility is to be plunged in God, for God is the bottom of the abyss, above everything and beneath everything, supreme in height and supreme in depth. That is why humility, like charity, is capable of continually increasing ... Humility is so precious that it reaches to things too high to be taught; it attains and possesses what words do not attain.'

Johannes Tauler (c.1300-1361)

‘Above all we must enter our own nothingness. If we were to reach the very pinnacle of all perfection, then it would be even more important that we should sink into the deepest ground, to the very roots of humility. For as the height of a tree depends on the depth of its roots, in the same way the heights we attain in this life are only as great as our humility is deep’(Sermon 48).

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

‘The source of humility is the soul’s true knowledge of herself and of my goodness. Only when discernment is rooted in humility is it virtuous, producing life-giving fruit and willingly yielding what is due to everyone.’

(Dialogue: The Way of Perfection, chapter 9)

Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897)

‘In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands’(from her Act of Oblation to Merciful Love).

Ruth Burrows OCD

‘Humility is acceptance of the truth about ourselves, not an effort to work up humble sentiments in spite of our obvious excellence! It is seeing and accepting the truth that we are not noble, good and spiritual’(Ascent to Love 58).

Teresa of Avila (c.1515-1582)

‘Set your eyes on Christ ... There you will learn true humility and self-knowledge gained in this way will not make you cowardly.’ (Interior Castle I.2.II).

‘Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor disturbs the soul; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquillity. Although we are distressed by our sinfulness ... this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived. (Way of Perfection 39).

Teresa of Avila (c.1515-1582)

Far from disturbing or depressing the soul, it enlarges it and makes it fit to serve God better. The other kind of distress only disturbs and upsets the mind and troubles the soul, so grievous is it ... When you find yourselves in this state, cease thinking, so far as you can, of your own wretchedness, and think of the mercy of God and of God's love and his sufferings for us' (Way of Perfection 39).

Humility Anthony Bloom ‘The Courage to pray’

‘The word humility comes from “humus” – fertile soil ... capable of making good use of the rubbish we tip into it, capable of transforming our refuse into wealth, of accepting every seed, giving it body, life, growth, to become fully itself without denaturing it ... Like the rich silent, creative earth, we should offer ourselves to the Other’(page 11).

Humility Anthony Bloom 'The Courage to pray'

An attitude of self-surrender which is at the same time extremely active. Self-surrender, because like the earth, humus, we give ourselves without reserve; active, because we are ready to respond to God's every suggestion, every call'(page 12).

- Humility requires self-knowledge
- This does not come through focussing on ourselves.

Rather we have to learn to see ourselves as God sees us. This requires contemplation where we come to see that, with all our limitations and sins, we are loved unconditionally by God.

Humility is an attitude of mind and heart, learned from Jesus, and inspired into a person by Jesus' Spirit, whereby a person recognises himself/herself as God's child, sharing the life of God's Son, and living, therefore, in total dependence on God's loving providence.

The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father, and can be totally counted on as a source of life, love and hope.