

Thomas Merton reminds us that despair is the absolute extreme of self-love. It is reached when we deliberately turn our backs on all help from anyone else.

In every one of us there is hidden some root of despair because in every one of us there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds of self-pity as soon as our resources fail us. Despair is the ultimate development of a pride incapable of acknowledging a need, of asking for and accepting help.

But a person who is truly humble cannot despair, because in the humble person there is no longer any such thing as self-pity. It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of true humility and its power in the spiritual life. Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul.

In perfect humility all selfishness disappears. If we were incapable of humility we would be incapable of joy, because humility alone can destroy the self-centeredness that makes joy impossible.

W. H. Auden, arguably the most accomplished and honored poet of his era, certainly recognized he was remarkably gifted but did not take himself too seriously. Those who got to know him well discovered that the intellectual brilliance was balanced by a kind of humility, even simplicity. As one Oxford friend put it: he had what madmen lack, a saving sense of the ridiculous.

Auden did not allow his head to be turned by praise. He was in fact remarkably free from vanity. This is not to say he did not know his own worth. He had complete confidence in his abilities; and it was this very self-confidence that protected him from flattery. True humility is unaffected by praise.

True humility is also uninhibited, undeterred by cursing. Isaiah speaks autobiographically. He has been granted the gift of language—he is after all a fine poet, and he is self-conscious of his ability. He has a skilled tongue, a tongue that has been rigorously trained. He has been trusted with a word from God which he knows will encounter harsh resistance.

His soaring vision of the restoration of Zion would have been seen by many in his audience as an outrageous pipe dream, an insult to their continuing plight as exiles, and some would have responded by mocking, insulting, even roughing up the prophet as he tried to address them.

But Isaiah knows he speaks for God and is supported by God. He does not feel disgraced even in the midst of public humiliation. Isaiah sets his face as hard as flint even as it is spat upon and his beard is torn.

Albert Camus, after winning the Noble Prize for Literature in 1957 was asked, “What was your first reaction to the personal attacks directed against you after you were named the winner?”

“Oh, first of all, I felt hurt. When a man has never asked for anything in life, and is then suddenly subjected to excessive praise and excessive blame, both praise and blame are equally painful. And then I rediscovered the notion I normally rely on whenever things go against me: that this was in the order of things.”

*In the order of things* . . . The writer of Philippians subverts the order of things: Being in the form of God, Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. God in Christ is infinitely more humble than those who pray to him and more transparent. The scandal of the incarnation is not that we are naked before God, but that God is naked before us.

Pride is threatened by nakedness. Pride has illusions to defend, excuses to make, an ego to serve. Humility has nothing to hide for it accepts oneself and others just as we are, limitations, vulnerabilities, and major imperfections included. Humility subverts the whole hierarchical social web of judgments and the limits such judgments impose in order to love and act fearlessly.

A humble person is not afraid of failure. Humility is the opposite of perfectionism. It gives up unrealistic expectations of how things ought to be for a clear vision of what human life is really like. Humility is the surest sign of strength.

Like all the qualities of God’s love in which we are made to share by virtue of being created in the image of God, humility is formed in us as a disposition only over a long time. To know the humility of Isaiah we need to join him morning by morning, year after year, as he wakens to listen as one who is taught.

*As one who is taught* . . . Apart from humility there is precious little desire to learn and even less ability. Learning to be of the same mind as was in Christ—becoming transparent through self-emptying, becoming a servant first—is an extraordinarily counter-cultural pursuit.

Learning to be of the same mind as was in Christ is also how the image of God in us grows into the likeness of God.