

Pride, and our Conversion towards Virtue

The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations. Therefore the Lord brings upon them unheard-of calamities, and destroys them completely. The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers, and enthrones the lowly in their place. The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations, and plants the humble in their place. The Lord lays waste the lands of the nations, and destroys them to the foundations of the earth. He removes some of them and destroys them, and erases the memory of them from the earth. Pride was not created for human beings, or violent anger for those born of women.

Ecclesiasticus 10.12-18

The whole of our moral and spiritual life is encapsulated in this short text – a summary of what it means, in practice, to be Christian. The focus of the text is our capacity for *pride*, and its causes and consequences. In particular, pride is equated with ‘forsaking the Lord’ and ‘withdrawing’ from our Maker – it is the *opposite* of attentiveness to God and to God’s commandments, which is why the ancient Christian tradition considers pride to be the most elemental of all the sins to which we are susceptible. If we can control pride, we can control any other part of ourselves; if we can overcome pride, we can overcome the allure of any other kind of sin or temptation. It is why, in the image, it is pride shown at the centre as someone especially *alluring*, the one from whom all the other vices each emerge in turn; and it is pride which is the primary plaything of the devil.



This text from Ecclesiasticus goes on to relate pride also to *anger*, another of the great vices against which the moral tradition of our faith counsels us. These – with lust and the craving for the indulgence of our appetites, among others – became known as the ‘deadly sins’, the other vices which are shown in the image emerging from pride, pride’s fruits. In the early centuries of the Church they were known also as ‘passions’ – because they

have the capacity to activate an intensity within us which veers speedily out of control: in this sense they were also sometimes described as *demonic*. That does not mean that they are caused by ‘demons’ as such, but, rather, that they *take control* of us in such a way that we ourselves are no longer completely in control of our own selves – and it is this which the ancient teachers of morality and prayer caution us against most of all. We have all seen people who are completely in thrall to lust or to greed, for example, or who are beside themselves with anger. Their whole equilibrium has been distorted out of balance. But it is pride which has this effect *most of all*.

Part of pride’s power is the way in which it can persuade us that it isn’t really that significant at all. It is less obviously aggressive than anger, less obviously exploitative than lust, less obviously self-damaging than greed. It is more *subtle*. At the same time, it is even more closely linked into our sense of self-satisfaction and self-assertiveness than its fellow vices. It is this, in particular, which led the great moral and spiritual teachers to consider it the gravest sin of all, because it makes an idol of our own *ego* in the place of God, just as the text from Ecclesiasticus itself says. Pride is the *forsaking* of God and *withdrawal* from his calling upon us. To be puffed up with pride is to *turn our backs* on God (cf 1 Timothy 6.4).

From the earliest times the moral and spiritual traditions have understood there to be one remedy which works better than all the others to subvert and correct the distortions of pride. This is the exercise of genuine *humility* – and this too is expressed in the text from Ecclesiasticus. It is a ‘broken and contrite heart’ (cf Psalm 51.17) which is our best offering to God; it is the ‘poor in spirit’ who will inherit the kingdom of heaven, and the ‘pure in heart’ who will see God (Matthew 5.3, 8). True humility – that which recognises us as we really are, warts and all, without any excuses or self-justification (unlike false humility, which is a kind of *show*, a perverse kind of pride in itself) – is the antidote, from which *virtue* flows in place of vice, and in which the ego finds its answer and its deepest meaning not in *self*, but in the *image and likeness of God* (cf Genesis 1.26-27). May this humility of soul take its place within us, too, as we orient ourselves ever more directly towards God.

The image shows the vices emerging from the sin of pride, which is itself controlled by the devil. The wall painting is in St Peter’s Church in Raunds (Northamptonshire), and dates from the fifteenth century.