

Last week in particular, but throughout the Gospels – Jesus invites his hearers – and that includes all of us – to enter the narrow gate, and follow after him.

It's an invitation to start living in an inverted world – one that seems turned upside-down – because it is so counter to what we are used to. This inverted world of the Gospel is distinguished by such values as generosity, service, mercy and compassion: a world where the last are first and the first last --- a message emphasized in today's first reading and Gospel. . .

If we are going to strive, struggle, endeavor and attempt to live in this inverted world – then a quality that is absolutely necessary for us to have is HUMILITY -- a subject that is not always well understood. . .

So let's try to get some practical insight into this virtue as I offer three contrasts of what humility is and what it isn't.

FIRST – humility is appreciation – not abasement, that is not self-degradation. Humility deals with truth – not insincerity. For example to have Simone Biles stand before us with her five gold medals around her neck but with downcast eyes saying ---  
“Ah sucks. I'm not a very good gymnast. I just jump around a little bit, that's all,” --would strike us not as being humble, but as being insincere.

Humility is truth. All of us do have certain talents. And we have achieved things with those talents. We are gifted in certain areas. We possess certain objects of which we're rightly fond and proud. To appreciate such gifts, to rejoice in them and not depreciate or lie about them, is the first step toward true humility.

Denying, abasing, belittling -- one's gifts is a form of reverse pride. Humility, as mentioned, is truth – it isn't abasement.

SECOND – and this is a balance to the first – humility is stewardship, not ownership.

Things not ours have been entrusted to us for a time to be used for the good of, and in service to, others. We are humble when we remember and practice that. We are proud when we don't. It's as simple as that.

We are humble when we think of ourselves as stewards: temporary gift-holders from God. We are proud when we think of ourselves as owners: permanent possessors in our own right.

We become proud when our God-given gifts slip into a sense of self-possessed and self-deserved ownership, --

and when this happens then status with a capital “S” is not far behind.

Then slowly we find we are acquiring possessions for their own sake in order to show people how rich we are;

then we begin to consume much more than we need – all designer brands, of course;

then we find that we are setting ourselves above everyone else.

Then we begin to think we are the origin of our gifts and we are deserving of our talents and we were set by God above the rest of ordinary folk who,

sooner or later, become invisible to us, especially the poor and the needy, and we no longer have a sense of simple stewardship. . .

Insensitivity, blindness, isolation, and greed enter in behind our gated communities. We get an inflated sense of self, begin to think of ourselves as the center of the universe, and don't even see those who are on the other side of the gate. Status and ego have taken hold. We are proud, rather than humble.

THIRD, humility is openness, not being closed. Which is to say, humility is always open to the Spirit and sensitive to where God wants one to serve – where, forgetful of self, one ought to share one's gifts and be alert to the needs of others.

I guess that's because the truly humble know they are stewards;

They know they rely on God for everything, even for life itself.

They know ultimately that they are dependent – something quite intolerable for the proud person.

Pride is not open to the Spirit. So full of oneself, one doesn't even know the Spirit is calling for them to pay attention to others.

"Everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled – but the one who humbles themselves will be exalted."

Let me end with a story.

An incident is told of the Revolutionary War, about an officer who set his men to cut down some trees which were needed to make a bridge.

There were not nearly enough men, and work was getting on very slow. Up rode an important-looking man and spoke to the officer in charge, who was urging on his men but doing nothing himself. The following dialogue took place:

"You haven't enough men for the job, have you?" Said the man on horseback.

"No, sir. We need some help." Answered the other man.

"Why don't lend a hand yourself?"

"Me, sir?" Why, I'm a corporal," replied the officer, looking rather affronted at the suggestion.

"Ah, true," quietly replied the other, and getting off his horse he labored with the men until the job was done.

Then he mounted his horse, and as he rode off – he said to the officer, "Corporal, the next time you have a job and have too few men to do it – you had better send for the Commander-in-Chief, and I will come again." And off rode General Washington.

THAT'S HUMILITY!