**Chapter 7: Humility**

February 4, June 5, October 5

*The seventh step of humility is a monk not only admit with their tongue but are also convinced in their heart that they are inferior to all and of less value, humbling themselves and saying with the Prophet: “I am truly a worm, not a man, scorned and despised by all” (Ps. 21[22]:7). “I was exalted, then I was humbled and overwhelmed with confusion” (Ps. 87[88]:16). And again, “It is a blessing that you have humbled me so that I can learn your commandments” (Ps. 118[119]:71, 73).*

This step of humility seems harsh. To be convinced that we are worthless and inferior – surely this cannot be good for us; to be despised by all – this is being mistreated and bullied, yes? To deny our humanity – what kind of humbling is this? Here, are we not being led into the extremes of humiliation, rather than into a healthy sense of our humble selves?

Perhaps we could look upon this guidance of St. Benedict as an extreme of words that seeks out another kind of extreme within us, touching upon this extreme, and so exposing it: the extreme of an idealised self-image, one not grounded in the reality of human life as fallible, vulnerable, and limited.

An idealised self-image works against our fallible, vulnerable, and limited reality; it denies it. It creates in us a standard too high to reach. Self-esteem dependent on idealised image is at best brittle, at worst unattainable. Here mercy and compassion are lost to perfectionism and anxiety.

On the ladder we discover that our humanity is qualified by circumstance, personality, ability, and gift. This is not such a bad thing. In this qualification we experience the freedom of a limiting that can focus us on what we truly have to offer. This dynamic has the potential to rub (sometimes quite abruptly) against our idealised self-image. To grow in the discovery and acceptance of our limited and earthly selves is to be convinced in our hearts that we are less than what our idealisations promote. While we cannot be everything to everyone, we can be something to some people. This is enough.

Leaving idealisation and illusion behind leads us back into who God is and who we really are. Meditation and community are important aspects of this journey. In meditation we practice the putting aside of all images, ideal or otherwise, so that a deeper, divine, and more coherent reality may emerge. In community we practice what it is to live a life less under the influence of these idealised images.

What we can experience in community is a kind of yo-yo effect, where the realities of our limited lives break through into circumstance only to be clouded by images and idealisations persuading us that we are more than reality says: no matter what, I can always be there to help; I am the expert, I always have something worthwhile to say about anything; I am the funny one that must always have a joke to tell; the happiness of another is always my responsibility. We bounce around what is realistic and what is idealistic, ascending and descending the ladder as we go. With practice, what eventually emerges is our reality: a precious, unique existence with limitations of personality and circumstance working with grace and spirit to reveal the eternal in the temporary.

But we hold this treasure in clay pots, so that the superiority of power may be from God and not from ourselves. We are subjected to every kind of hardship, but not hindered; we see no way out but we are not at a loss; we are pursued but never abandoned, knocked down, but not destroyed, at every moment we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus, too, may be visible in our body. (2 Cor. 4:7-10, RNJB)