

Fr. Tim Clancy
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Humility

Think back for a moment to the last time you felt humbled, depressed, overwhelmed with grief or anxiety, the last time you felt attacked unfairly. Did *you* feel blessed?

Or take Paul. Think back to the last time you felt like a fool. Or a failure. The last time you were humiliated. Did you feel then like one of God's chosen ones?

What are these guys talking about?

I want to suggest that what Jesus and Paul find blessed about such suffering is less the pain itself, than the ability to feel that kind of pain, or better put, the vulnerability to suffer that kind of pain.

We can feel dejected, because we have dreams that extend beyond our reach. We can feel sorrow because we have allowed others to become important to us. We open ourselves to persecution because we stand up for what we believe in. We can feel like fools because we have the humility to listen to other's criticisms. We can feel like failures because we have the courage to try something new. In short, we are vulnerable to such curses because we *are* blessed, blessed with *faith* in our ideals and in others, in our selves, and ultimately in a God who calls us to our true self. We are vulnerable to such curses because we still have *hope* that while we may never reach our ideals, we can still be better than we are; that our world may never be fully cleansed of sin but we can still work to build a *better* world, a world still not perfect, but one that is *more* caring, *more* just than today's. Ultimately we are vulnerable to such curses because of our love, thanks to which we are not our own or on our own. Such curses are graces, albeit at times dark graces, to use Martin Luther's term, graces sometimes only appreciable as such in retrospect, on the other side of the suffering. But it is such dark graces that ultimately forge who we are, its such dark graces that transform us, that save us.

In today's first reading Zephaniah calls upon the humble of the earth. Meister Eckhart asks in his counsels on discernment, given to his novices when he was novice master, which virtue is the most important: love or humility? His answer is that it is humility, for humility is the soil in which love can grow. Indeed humility is the mother of all the virtues.

The English word humility comes from the Latin *humus*, earth; The Hebrew word for earth is also its word for humanity, Adam. God created Adam from adam, breathing life into

the earthen figure he had shaped from the mud.

To be human is to be earthen. Christians are called to see themselves not as some rare and precious jewel, or like a knight in shining armor, a glorious demi-god, who never wavers in the face of danger, who is impervious to fear, who enjoys such strength that he can stand alone in need of no one, who defines himself by his fame and glory. (Maybe he needs people after all, at least to admire him, to mirror his glory back to himself) A hero may no longer see himself as an ordinary human being, a mere mortal. A hero is tempted to think that he has transcended his own humanity and has become like a god. But though hardly like the God whom we worship in Jesus Christ.

To be human is not to be like being a glittering diamond, it is more like being a clod of dirt, crumbly, messy, commonplace. This is what it means to be a human being, and this is what it means to be blessed. For it is these very qualities that make us fertile ground capable of bearing new life. Before you can plant a seed you have to break up the ground beneath your feet, you need to turn over the soil, you have to expose its unseemly underside to the rains and the open air. A pot of jewels is dazzling, its worth a fortune, but it makes for poor potting soil. The earth must compost the death and rot of life gone by, if it is to ever bear new life.

So too fertile soil must be porous. And so too, a fertile soul must be a porous soul, a soul empty enough to receive God's word, thirsty enough to soak in God's rain. The very strength and purity of a jewel ensures its sterility. A diamond may last forever, but it cannot sustain life, it cannot cooperate in God's creative power. God's grace, like the rains, falls on the just and the unjust alike. But God's grace runs off the proud like water runs off a ruby. Those who think themselves great cannot take in God's grace because they do not recognize any need for it.

But we who know what it is like to be humbled, we know better. We know our failings and weaknesses. We know our need for others. We know what we are made of and to whom we belong.