

### Sermon 15 December 2024. Advent 3

A couple of months back a leaflet appeared my letterbox with the photo of one of the candidates for the local council elections, and words I am a proud xyz. I'm not going to tell you what the x y z stood for, because that would probably give away who the candidate was, and in any case three self-descriptors are not necessary to what I want to say. At this point I stopped reading, because I felt really uncomfortable with this intro, and I found myself asking what is it that's making me react to this self-description? I have nothing against x type people, or y type people, or for that matter, z type people. In fact I know and like and admire quite a lot of people in all of those three categories. Then it hit me that it was this thing about being proud that'd stopped me in my tracks. Despite the fact that it's a bit of a cliché – I'm a proud this or that or the other is a quite common claim. And I have to admit here I was partly reacting to the cliché element, but I felt there was something more at stake here. I remembered at this point that pride was one of the seven deadly sins in the middle ages, and in fact the deadliest of the deadlies, not because it's about arrogance – arrogance is pretty unattractive wherever it appears, and pretty obvious as well, but pride was considered the deadliest because there can be something subtle and secretive about pride; it worms its way into our psyches and makes a home there if we're not careful. I'm proud that I'm this or that, but it's something I just know without having to say it out loud. There can be a smugness about it. At

least in the leaflet it was out loud. So I could dismiss the concern the mediaevals had about its smugness and secrecy.

But there was still something else that concerned me. You must by now think I spend all my time talking to myself in some sort of introverted internal dialogue – and you wouldn't be too far wrong. Anyway, the answer to this question came much more recently when I was reading Bernard Schlink's new book *The Granddaughter*, where the two main characters Kasper the grandfather and Sigrun the step-granddaughter are having a conversation, about their German nationality. Sigrun has said she's sick of Germans being ashamed of being German, and she's proud of it. Her grandfather replies: you can't be proud of what are; you can only be proud of what you've done. I realised that although this could also be open to discussion, Granddad Kasper had nailed it for me – we are all combinations of x y and z in some form or another, however we choose to describe ourselves, or self-identify – and none of these things can be sources of pride, or shame for that matter – they simply are descriptions of what we are. They don't make us better (or worse) human beings; they don't bring us closer to God.

Another German writer, the historian Leopold von Ranke, famously said there are no times in history that are closer to God than others; all times are equally close for the people who live in them; and we could say the same for all groups of people, wherever they live and whoever they are and whoever their ancestors were. We

could name all sorts of natural or accidental human characteristics here: whatever their gender or sexual orientation, whatever their age, whatever their eye colour, whatever their level of ability or disability. None of these things are things to be proud of, or ashamed of. They just are.

I think, on further reflection, that there might be an exception to what Schlink is saying, and I think it's this. If we've been discriminated against in the past because of something in who or what we are, something we have not control over, then I think we are entitled to be quite assertive about this part of our identity, as a deliberate rejection of that discrimination. I suspect that's the point the candidate for local election was making in the leaflet: I'm this, and in the past I'd never have been allowed to admit it, or if I did, I'd never have been allowed to stand for election, but now, here I am, and I'm prepared to be assertive about who I am. The same may be true of the character of Sigrun in Schlink's novel: she may be a descendant of Nazis three generations back, and members of the East German Stasi two generations ago, but she is not prepared to feel guilty about or ashamed of who she is.

Nevertheless, Grandfather Kasper also has a valid point. Once we start achieving things, then maybe we can start to be proud – but even that's a maybe; actually a very big maybe – for the very simple reason that Christians should be aware of, namely that we're not justified by our works (as our reforming ancestors would have

put it) or that pride is the deadliest of the seven sins (as our catholic forebears would have put it). But that's another discussion, or rather at another stage in the discussion. The truth reveals itself in stops and starts, not all at once, or very rarely all at once. At this stage, in the Advent readings, we're still in the foothills, with the question about pride in what we are given at birth, or pride in what we might have done with our lives.

This is what John the Baptist is concerned with when he says: 'Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.' Don't assume all is well in your / our relationship with God just because you were born 'children of Abraham', born this or that sort of person. This is not something to take pride in this, according to John, as if you or I were somehow a special sort of person, more worthy of respect than others. No, instead 'Bear fruits...' Do something. It's then that the crowds start asking: 'What then should we do?' And John proceeds to give some advice, tailored to every sort and condition of person. Justification by God's grace is still to come, and come it will – but in the Advent season, the foothills of truth, what counts is what we do or fail to do. Maybe we can even take some pride in the things we do, so long as we don't let it go to our heads – though the time for pride will pass, in due course, and we will learn of the sheer gratuitousness of God's grace, and learn to rely on that alone.

