



8 March 2015
The Third Sunday in Lent
Choral Evensong
Proverbs 27 vv. 1–10
Luke 14 vv. 1–14

Affluence and Dis-ease

By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor, Dean, St John's College

May I speak in the name and to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

'Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous or overwhelming ; but who, who is able to stand before envy or jealousy?':

The words of the writer, or perhaps collator, of wise sayings in the Book of *Proverbs* at least 2, 800 years old contrasting the overwhelming but passing nature of anger with the insidious, pervasive, infectious nature of envy or jealousy.

Last November the headmistress of a top independent school engaged in a very rash (or possibly courageous) activity: she launched a stinging attack on parents, including, quite clearly, parents of her own school, St Paul's Girl's School in West London.

Accusing many parents of a '*kind of ticking frenetic anxiety*', Clarissa Farr warned that as a consequence children were growing up unable to cope with failure. Speaking at a workshop of fellow educationalists, she said of many of 'her' parents who ultimately pay 'her' salary:

'Their children will succeed above all and they're not at all on board with the idea of school as a community, learning to come second or that learning to give ground is an important part of education... Anything that might result in success not happening for their son or daughter, in however small an arena, they're frightened of.'

Before any parents present in the chapel (including the person on their hind legs at this moment) are tempted to throw themselves into a mental abyss of recrimination and self-flagellation, it is worth pointing out that the issue underlying such hyper-competitiveness - status envy and status anxiety - the concern that we are not meeting the expected ideals of success, *that 'we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one'*² - extends far and wide, particularly in middle class and upper-middle class culture, and well beyond the world of parenting, and has become the focus for a growing literature on the part of concerned psychologists and others. One author, Oliver James, has sought to map the phenomenon using the description of it as an Affluenza drawing a clear picture of what he describes as the pernicious, infectious epidemic nature of status envy and its consequences.³ In a similar vein, another warns that worrying about status is '*so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives*'.⁴

¹ <http://www.hmc.org.uk/blog/top-head-attacks-parents/>
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/article4282227.ece>

² Alain de Botton, 2005, *Status Anxiety*, Vintage.

³ Oliver James, 2007, *Affluenza: a contagious middle class virus causing depression, anxiety, addiction and ennui*, Vermilion.

⁴ Alain de Botton, 2005, *Status Anxiety*, Vintage.

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The concern is real with very real consequences. For one of the surprising but consistent research findings over the last decade concerns the high level of depression, anxiety, self-harm and rule-breaking behavior among adolescents and young people – not in those places where concern has long been expressed - on the sink estates of our cities growing up in poverty with few economic, cultural and familial resources and facing tough challenges and choices on a daily basis - but rather among those from privileged backgrounds, those young people brought up in the ‘magic circles’ of privilege, of education and money.⁵

This is rather extraordinary because the natural assumption has been that wealth and a strong educational background provide both a buffer to the worst of life’s experiences and, frankly a leg-up in society, a solid stepladder to success. But the evidence now strongly suggesting that adolescents and young people growing up within ‘a culture of affluence’, at least within the Anglo-American world, are growing up in a dangerous environment; many are growing up ‘at risk’, at risk of various anxiety-related disorders, but also of a fragile sense of self, of high levels of narcissism, of limited compassion. Clearly such young people do not experience the social, economic and psychological harms that flow from being brought up with the challenging context of multiple deprivation, nevertheless when the question is posed:

Who is able to stand before envy or jealousy?

The current situation suggests: not necessarily the wealthy or privileged.

And if we turn to our New Testament reading we can also easily add – not necessarily the righteous. In noticing how the guests chose their places, what was at stake for them in their choices and positions, Jesus was of course addressing the Pharisees, the religious of his day, but even clergy in the Church of England are not immune to the allure of status: It is certainly not completely unknown to find clergy on big occasions with clear views about their positions in processions or where their seat should be in the Cathedral sanctuary.

II

That human beings compare themselves with others is one of the most established facts of modern psychology. The acerbic journalist, H. L. Menchen famously described this in his definition of wealth, the so-called: ‘Brother-in-law test’

Wealth. Any income that is at least \$100 more a year than the income of one’s wife’s sister’s husband.’

But none of this is news.

And it wasn’t news nearly three millennia ago when the writer of the book of *Proverbs* prepared his ink and unfurled his papyrus. The moral psychology of the book of *Proverbs* expressed in the pithy statements of the wise may have been largely replaced by research based accessible popularizing books, but the ‘take away’ message is remarkably similar to that articulated by writers like Oliver James or Tanya Byron or Alain de Bottom.

⁵ See for example: Suniya Luthar, 2013, ‘The Problem with Rich Kids’, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201310/the-problem-rich-kids>



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Take for example, the opening line of our first reading:

1 *'Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.'*

The issue here is of course control, and its limits: Control, autonomy, planning – is all very attractive, it makes us feel secure, but it has its natural limits. Wealth, and the power to choose, easily seduces people into thinking they are in control and therefore responsible - even wholly responsible for their own success and destiny – rather than this flowing form a combination of genetics, their starting point in life, plenty of luck and maybe hard work. And the wealthier people become the greater the sense that they can customize their lives and control their environment. But people so easily overestimate what they can actually control – in that sense children and their successes or failures – or often simply the ways in which they are different from their parents and their independent choices – are one of those aspects of life which are not easily controlled. The curious result of such unrealistic expectations of control: self-blame, shame and depression.

Or again take the encouragement to humility of the second line:

2 *'Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips'*

Which is of course amplified by Jesus's parable. We are simply not good judges of our own standing or ability. Unless we learn otherwise we tend towards an inflated sense of who we are. The wisdom in placing one's self lower can of course be merely pragmatic or strategic, but a genuine embrace of humility, in so far as we are capable, and a letting go of striving for distinction and place brings contentment and opens the door to all sorts of insights.

Or further the reflection upon desire in verse 7:

7 *'The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.'*

The simple message: that the constant pursuit of the next thing that the ego desires, the next goal, the next psychological 'hit or high' leads to a lack of attention to that which is actually consumed or achieved – from the child obsessed by a reward system in primary school to the eminent scientist desperate for the acknowledgement of his peers through the big prize - but who has lost enjoyment in his research.

Who is able to stand before envy or jealousy?

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are followers of the one human being whose humanity was complete, fully realized, the embodiment of God's Wisdom in human form, a person able to stand, able to be at ease with himself and with others rooted in his response to God's call on his life. Our mental well-being, collectively and individually, is then fundamentally rooted in divine Wisdom, in the human task of deepening consciousness, developing understanding and seeking to live wisely through his grace and after his example.

In our second reading this evening Jesus develops a teaching on humility by providing two apparently separate responses to a social situation fraught with the issues of status. The first calls to mind Proverbs, and is wise in its pragmatism – if you under-pitch yourself you may well be elevated.

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The second is radical, but potentially much more transformative. If you really want to tackle the issue at the heart of this matter, really want to save your soul, want to be wise, humble, satisfied, content with what tomorrow brings – then Jesus suggests to the Pharisees and all religious people – place yourself in a very different seat next to very different people. The sort of people, that in our respectability and distinction, we may have grown to fear. For in such company we can grow to appreciate - as the carers and campaigners of our society who work alongside, and in solidarity with those whose lives are impaired or impoverished by ill-health or cruel circumstance or chronic lack of opportunity, do - the sheer courage and resilience and dignity of others, a perspective that will help you, me to stand firm in the face of envy and jealousy with all its disabling and disfiguring impacts on our souls and bodies. Amen