

The Story of Bamboo

(Monsignor McHenry is away this weekend. This homily he preached six years ago.)

Once upon a time, in the heart of the Western Kingdom, lay a beautiful garden. And there, in the cool of the day, the Master of the garden was wont to walk. Of all the denizens of the garden, the most beautiful and most beloved was gracious and noble bamboo. Year after year, bamboo grew yet more noble and gracious, conscious of his Master's love and watchful delight, but modest and gentle withal. And often when the wind came to revel in the garden, Bamboo would cast aside his grave stateliness, to dance and play right merrily, tossing and swaying and leaping and bowing in joyous abandon, leading the Great Dance of the garden, which most delighted the Master's heart.

Now, once upon a day, the Master himself drew near to contemplate his Bamboo with eyes of curious expectancy. And Bamboo, in a passion of adoration, bowed his great head to the ground in loving greeting. The Master spoke: "Bamboo, Bamboo, I would use you." Bamboo flung his head to the sky in utter delight. The day of days had come, the day for which he had been made, the day to which he had been growing hour by hour, the day in which he would find his completion and his destiny.

His voice came low: "Master, I'm ready. Use me as Thou wilt." "Bamboo," – The Master's voice was grave --- "I would have to take you and cut you down!" A trembling of great horror shook Bamboo..."Cut ...me... down? Me who thou, Master, has made the most beautiful in all thy Garden...cut me down! Ah, not that. Not that. Use me for the joy, use me for the glory, oh master, but cut me not down!"

Beloved Bamboo,"—The Master's voice grew graver still—"If I cut you not down, I cannot use you."

The garden grew still. Wind held his breath. Bamboo slowly bent his proud and glorious head. There was a whisper: "Master, if thou cannot use me other than to cut me down... then do thy will and cut". "Bamboo, beloved Bamboo, I would cut your leaves and branches from you also". "Master, spare me. Cut me down and lay my beauty in the dust; but would thou also take from me, my leaves and branches too?" Bamboo, if I cut them not away, I cannot use you." The Sun hid his face. A listening butterfly glided fearfully away. And Bamboo shivered in terrible expectancy, whispering low: "Master, cut away." "Bamboo, Bamboo, I would yet... split you in two and cut out your heart, for if I cut not so, I cannot use you." Then Bamboo bowed to the ground: "Master, Master... then cut and split."

So did the Master of the garden took Bamboo...and cut him down...and hacked off his branches...and stripped off his leaves...and split him in two...and cut out his heart. And lifting him gently carried him to where there was a spring of fresh sparkling water in the midst of his dry fields. Then putting one end of the broken Bamboo in the spring and the other end into the water channel in His field, the Master laid down gently his beloved Bamboo...

And the spring sang welcome, and the clear sparkling waters raced joyously down the channel of bamboo's torn body into the waiting fields. Then the rice was planted, and the days went by, and the shoots grew and the harvest came. In that day Bamboo, once so glorious in his stately beauty, was yet more glorious in his brokenness and humility. For in his beauty he was life abundant, but in his brokenness he became a channel of abundant life to his Master's world.

Author Unknown

“My child, conduct your affairs with humility. Humble yourself the more the greater you are and you will find favor with God.” That is the Old Testament Book of Sirach's version of wisdom regarding the virtue of humility. “For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled; whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” That is New Testament wisdom on the virtue of humility from the mouth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Why is humility so integral to our lives as Godly people and as followers of Jesus Christ?

Humility is a virtue of the kingdom but it is almost counter-intuitive in this world. It almost has to be revealed to us. Humility does not make sense to many people today in the world of celebrity and the selfie. It does not appear to be beneficial or helpful let alone the optimal development or use of our gifts, our talents, our abilities. With humility it is almost as if they are being wasted. The story of Bamboo makes that clear. Humility is not at all the way of our world or our culture. But humility—and the trust that must go hand in hand with it—is what will ultimately make me my best self, make me truly human.

Look at Christ cut down, challenged, dismissed, falsely accused, betrayed, abandoned, beaten, ridiculed, humiliated. The word humility comes from the Latin word for earth, humus. It means to be of-the-earth or as we would say today, down-to-earth. Humility is down-to-earth truth. To know ourselves as we really are and not simply as we would like to be. Humility is a kingdom virtue and it contrasts with the pride, the arrogance, the hubris, the unbending intransigence of our wills in this worlds. Humility doesn't make sense to us, as it did not to Bamboo in the story—not in the beginning. Look at our country in the present moment—are we being cut down to size, with things being stripped away? Have we not experienced our own lives being hollowed out? We do not like this but perhaps our God is in the process of bringing humility to birth in us so as to use us in truly life-giving and beautiful ways. Humility knows that there is another way. And so, like Bamboo, the one with humility will allow herself to be brought low; allow himself to be deprived but always with the mindfulness that God's ways are not our ways but they are God's ways.

In the parable of Bamboo, it is true that there is a beauty in the life abundant but there is nothing there which truly compares with being a channel of abundant life from God to others in our very brokenness. That is what Jesus Christ offers that nothing else on earth does.