

The Value Of The Lower Place

I suppose everything we assume about precedence and power inspires us to value "a place at the top". There is the top table, and the premier league, and the fast lane, there are top marks and first class. It costs you to get to the top; and many of us don't have much taste for sitting there. Perhaps it is worth while to spell out to ourselves what we think about it all.

I Know My Place

It's wisdom to recognise the real greatness of other people, and to acknowledge that relatively speaking we may be destined for less significance in the great scheme of things. In that sense, *we know our place*. But that's a human way of looking at things. God, who designs great gifts which sometimes put his children into starring roles on earth, does not think like this. God knows that the truth about human beings is nearly always hidden, and that what they really are is fully known only to him. It is certainly true that brother John, who lived in the little convent of Fiesole outside Florence, was able to stain and mark canvas and wood panels and wet plaster with such skill and imagination that he became famous the world over as *Fra Angelico*, the angelic Brother. He has left us miraculous pictures, from which grace, joy, and sheer *healthiness* shine out, giving us a marvellous sense of blessedness. There is no doubt that such a man had a deep devotion in him; no-one who did not know holiness could have produced these pictures. But what of the friars who lived next door to him? I don't even know one of their names (though I'm pretty sure none of them could paint like John). But God knows their quality as clearly as I think I know John's. God does not need a painting as evidence of devotion; he discerns us from afar, and knows our inmost reality. So before God we need not concern ourselves with our achievements or the marks conferred by the Exam Board. The Nobel Prize would give no 'new information' to God, and a whole lifetime of undiscovered canvasses would not make John of Fiesole more loved by God. How often we need to remember: we have nothing to earn from God.

I Don't Know My Place

The Gospel we hear today bids us to seek out the lowest place: but that is a preparation for

the experience of exaltation. God's plan is that every one of us should be *exalted*. It is lovely when a little child, playing quietly on the grass, suddenly sees that Daddy is coming in at the gate. The game is forgotten and the child hurtles clumsily across the lawn, and is caught up and thrown up ten feet into the sky. That is a little taste of the exaltation which God has in mind for each of us. We shall experience it, because we are always going to be little: even the greatest of us. Death is a great teacher of this fact. Even the greatest of us becomes little again at last. That God the Father should stoop once again, to pick up this dust, and to form it, and breathe life into it, is the transfiguring hope which we treasure. We can't know what it will be like, when each of us has his or her reward from God. If we could design such reward, and confer it, we would make our own heaven. We do not hope to do this, nor should we. This is a judgment, and a blessing, which belongs to God. Only God knows.

Vanity. What bad taste it

is, when we are anxious for our dignity and precedence! How petty it is to want to dominate each other, or to submit to such domination! We should cultivate a certain fondness for that low place which belongs to the little child; it can give us humour and elasticity when we feel the wheels of earthly power turn near to us. God has shared with us a secret about the future: it's closely connected to the secret truth about us, and it turns the ultimate future into a time of surprises, revelations, and above all *recognition* of who is great in the Kingdom of Heaven. *FrPhilhip*