



**GRAY'S
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Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Wednesday 15th November 2023 – Licensing of Revd Stephen Baxter as Preacher to Gray's Inn by the Bishop of London

Revd Stephen Baxter

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11

Firstly, a heartfelt expression of thanks to you all for your support – to Bishop Sarah for coming directly from a doubtlessly intense few days at General Synod; to the community of the Inn for the kindness of your welcome and to my long-suffering and wonderfully supportive wife, family and friends. It is a joy to be with you this evening.

Chapter 2 of St Paul's letter to the young church in Philippi, in Macedonia, contains one of the bible's most glorious, lyrical, poetic summaries of the essence of our faith.

God in the form of Jesus chooses to sweep down from heaven to our level, to become human, to assume the role of a slave and to die as slaves died. Jesus is then lifted up in exaltation to be the true object of worship for all.

There are certain echoes of the dynamics of the prologue at the start of John's gospel which will be the climactic reading at fast-approaching Carol services.

God does not remain a distant, disinterested or spectating deity, but becomes fully involved in our chaos alongside us.

Paul writing from prison, probably in Ephesus, urges members of the church in Philippi, which has been disturbed by disputes between its leaders, to follow this divine model of humility.

Humility may not necessarily be quality attributed to us folk from blessed Yorkshire. I confess that at lunch here three weeks ago I too readily blurted out one of my favourite quotations which was made by one of Bishop Sarah's predecessors the now Lord Hope. Lord Hope, with, unerring accuracy in my biased book, explained that the best people are Yorkshire folk who have left Yorkshire. As I review my cultural heroes, Henry Moore, David Hockney, Alan Bennett, Alex Turner, it seems to make Perfect Sense...or it is, alternatively, outrageously arrogant.

So us Tykes probably need to be brought down a peg or two, or regularly eat humble pie. I had a helping two weeks ago. I was cycling from the Inn back to St Stephen Walbrook along High Holborn when the bag containing a priest's alb I was foolishly dangling from the handlebars suddenly became caught in the front wheel. I was instantly catapulted onto the unforgiving surface of High Holborn, with my helmet thankfully doing its job. A classic scene from Rev, as one colleague described it. A number of angelic helpers came to my aid and I escaped with a few cuts and bruised ribs. It was perhaps a good lesson in humility – perhaps I was too pleased with myself for being able swan around on my bike between these two wonderful places where I have the privilege of working. It was incidentally the third time a helmet has saved me – previous incidents involved hitting a badger and crashing when swerving to avoid a cat...so a fair conclusion is that your new Preacher can be somewhat accident-prone. Beware.

Humility may not seem to be a widely respected quality in our world and is perhaps often equated with weakness. With our conditioning we may feel pressurised to sell or promote ourselves and to project glowing impressions in social media. And humility isn't particularly in vogue in the House of Commons.

But when we encounter true humility, it has a beautiful glow. The humility of Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu was of course crucial in enabling South Africa to emerge without major turbulence as a nation after apartheid. The humility of our late Queen glowed and has clearly influenced and inspired her successor; the widespread and very deep affection for Bobby Charlton was enhanced by the respect for his humility as a person.

Studies in behaviours within businesses have identified higher overall performance and clear benefits from humility within leaders who are prepared to admit mistakes, to take responsibility when things go wrong and to attribute credit for successes to others. Such benefits observed include increased collaboration, co-operation and flexibility in developing strategies.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was correct in identifying Christianity as a slave religion. His rejection of it on this basis was because it is the diametric opposite of his *Übermensch* philosophy of the super-human – the toxic thinking that inspired Hitler.

Because humility is at the very heart of the patterns of activity of God, humility and service inspired by and rooted in faith I believe are empowering and liberating as we tune into these divine patterns in our vocation as co-workers in God's creation.

Conforming to patterns of humility is assisted and enhanced by, firstly, being thankful – thankful that all we have is due to the grace of God; secondly being teachable - open to learning, accepting that we are perennial students; and thirdly, honest self-awareness – awareness of our value and limitations.

Humility is not about self-debasement or beating ourselves up – as Tutu puts it, no-one is a divine accident – we are all essential to God's plan. We all contribute through our gifts, while of course we must retain the crucial ability to laugh at ourselves.

The word humility is linked to the Latin *humi*, meaning on the ground – which is where we are required to operate following the one who came to dwell among us.

In what I understand was a wonderful service for the BBC journalist George Alagiah last week at St Martin-in-the-Fields, George was described as being particularly skilled at getting down and speaking to people at their own level.

And so as a country, as a church, as a community as individuals we are called to use the resources and talents God has provided to be on the ground understanding, supporting and seeking justice and relief for the oppressed, for the refugee, for all those who are struggling, remembering the ever-relevant call of the prophet Micah:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.

I hope to avoid further prostration on High Holborn but I very much hope I can serve on the ground here. I am indeed humbled by the opportunity to serve this deeply historic Inn with its strong and gifted community. I certainly have much to learn. I hope and pray that you will walk with me as I learn and discern how best to serve. And spare not the humble pie!