

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY II | 28.08.22**

Ecclesiasticus 10: 12-18; Hebrews 133: 1-8, 15-16; St Luke 14: 1, 7-14

In our society at large there is an interesting tension. We like to think that everyone is as good as anyone else – that we reward people on merit and not on whether they were born with a silver spoon in their mouths, in social housing or from a far-away country. Yet there is a real sense of pride when someone we know is called to Buckingham Palace to receive one of yearly awards for conspicuous service to the community. Even in the Church we award titles and places of honour for certain ranks of people – and talk about preferment when someone gets a (so called) ‘top job’. The current political crisis over the cost of heating has already triggered the idea that there may need to be ‘hand-outs’ for the poor and the growing series of strikes is reminding us of the 1970s when the trade-off between profits for big businesses and fair wages for employees is again at the top of the national agenda. Some are already talking of Liz Truss as a latter-day Margaret Thatcher; I haven’t yet heard of a parallel for Rishi Sunak.

So when Jesus uses a parable about the social climbers of his own day, those who wanted the best seats at the banquet, perhaps we are right to sit up and listen. For the question arises about how appropriate ambition is – and how we respond to those who seek to organise our political life, or take the lead in our work places and indeed to entertain us. Is it just the most competent, the most charming, thoughtful and affirming people who tend to get to the top? Or is it those with the skills to push other people out of the way; those who ooze confidence and ambition? Do we properly reward those with drive but who perhaps don’t fit the corporate model or whose ideas are unusual?

And what about those whose motivation is not ambition but compassion? What happens to them?

Our Readings today invite us to yearn for something rather more satisfying and wholesome than the urge to get to the top. I am constantly encouraged to read in the Church press of the efforts that ordinary people are making to serve their local communities: setting up food banks; promoting ecological solutions to the energy crisis; ensuring the young, living in rural areas, have affordable homes set aside for them; making sure there are doctors and dental surgeries available throughout the nation; caring for the lonely and the isolated; making sure our streets are safe from violence and making sure gangsters are not free to force their way into people’s homes: the list is endless.

**And this form of compassion is exactly what the Letter to the Hebrews is driving at: it calls us to a new level of imagination so that we really can reflect on what it is like to be a prisoner, at home or abroad (for example in Myanmar where the arrest of anyone thought critical of the regime – including an ex UK ambassador - is on the increase), to imagine what it is like to be subjected to torture or to be involved in child marriage or enforced slavery.**

**The support of any of these issues is unlikely to get you any reward or recognition but each of them needs to be part of the ‘breath of life’ for any who seek to build God’s kingdom. God is not interested whether we get recognised or not; after all, who said, ‘Don’t let your right hand know what the left hand is doing’? But there is one small note of caution.**

**As you walk up from Trafalgar Square, with St Martin’s in the Fields on your right and the National Portrait Gallery on your left, just as the road bends to the right towards Theatreland, you will see the tall statue to the nurse Edith Cavell. Born in a Norfolk Vicarage in the 1860s she volunteered to serve with the Red Cross just before the 1<sup>st</sup> World War broke out. As the German forces overran Belgium, Edith and her small team found themselves caught behind enemy lines.**

**But as a Red Cross nurse she was relatively safe, nursing soldiers of every nationality who ended up in her wards. But some of the young British, French and Belgian soldiers were only superficially wounded and they longed to get back to England as quickly as they could. So Nurse Cavell found herself drawn into one of the networks that smuggled these young men out of German occupied territory. But it wasn’t long before an informer got wind of what she was doing and in August 1915 she was arrested and put on trial before a military court martial for helping 2000 allied soldiers escape. She showed no fear at her trial as she spoke: *Patriotism, she said, is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone. I can't stop while there are lives to be saved.***

**And all of this came out of her deep Christian faith. Christ had called her to nurse, and once in Brussels had called her to do everything in her power to protect these young men. It was not just humanitarian aid she was offering but a witness to the faith that lived within her. And she made absolutely no fuss when eventually she was executed. She was just 30 years of age.**

**And yet, on one of the busiest streets in London stands her statue: *for all who humble themselves will be exalted...***

**Of course there are plenty of other statues around and many of them, just at the moment, are subject to some historical ‘testing’ as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Slave trader Edward Colston’s statue found its way into Bristol docks and the memorial to Tobias Rustat in Jesus College Chapel in Cambridge was nearly removed by the authorities there. Another to Cecil Rhodes is under similar scrutiny.**

**In our day, deferring to people with privileges and titles has all but disappeared – and a good thing too.**

**But there is One who knows what each of us is about and I hope that in building the Church here, we seek out and celebrate the achievements of all of us – from GCSE passes to success in a much sought-after job interview. Here at least, in the words of Mary in the Magnificat, *the lowly are raised up and the (idle!) rich are sent empty away!***