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Humility, Humiliation and Hope:
An Extended Homily on the Crucible for Authentic Character in Leadership

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Over thirty years ago, I was preparing for ordination in the Church of England. As part of my training, I was despatched on placement to a remote rural parish, where I found myself one day being assessed on my skills leading a Bible Study. This is not something I have done much about since, but I do recall a group of curious and engaged laity, trying to grapple with the text I had set them, and the discussion I was leading - at the same time as marking me for my effort and expertise, and also trying to find the whole exercise vaguely educational and spiritually edifying.

What I especially remember about the Bible Study was the passage I chose: *John 13* - Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, in which he elects to serve them, and so humbles himself. And I asked individuals to talk about a time when they had humbled themselves. They told moving stories about service, costly sacrifice, and of putting others before themselves. As we edged round the room, we came to the Vicar. But he had clearly missed the point of this exercise, and instead told a long story about a time when he had been humiliated. The room went silent, unable to process the Vicar's story about his pride and self-worth somehow being devalued, and his perceived loss of status. Now, the difference between humility and humiliation is obvious. It is one thing to humble yourself. It is another thing to be humiliated by others.

Humility is the quality of being humble. But in our person-centred-fulfilment-therapeutically-attuned culture, we often conflate humility with humiliation. We assume low self-regard and unworthiness to be debasing. But in religion, humility is rooted in perspective and submission - and being "un-selved": a liberation from consciousness of the self; a form of *temperance* that is neither having pride (or haughtiness) nor indulging in self-deprecation. True humility comes, ironically, from a deep inner self-confidence, and attends to the needs of and the valuing of others. The humble person is not preoccupied with themselves; but rather, occupied with the needs of others. Humiliation, in contrast, is imposed on us externally, and it frequently shames us.

One might suppose that true humility is almost unattainable, and real humiliation undesirable. Both terms are linked to the words humus and *hubris*. ‘Humus’ means being earthed, and the humble person is ultimately a *grounded* person: sure of their being, so not above themselves - and knows they are not above others, no matter what giftedness, rank or status they hold. ‘Hubris’, in contrast, is self-inflated, puffed-up self-perception; and it lacks grounded-ness. Grounding is fundamental, as Justine Allain Chapman notes:

“Humility is the quality that...all mature Christians grow into; a quality where a deep sense of inner dignity and value is palpable to others and brings them solace, it is a fruit of the Spirit, sometimes translated as ‘gentleness’. It can be misunderstood as a false modesty of doing yourself down and as such can be quite manipulative, in refusing to allow others to express gratitude or admiration, for example. Humble people are grounded (which means lowly, on the ground or earth). They are secure in themselves and in touch with their own vulnerability as human beings but also fully aware of their strengths...”¹

Research from Harvard Business School - a famous study and essay from Jim Collins at the turn of the 21st century - found that many of the top organisations and institutions in the world were led by *humble* people.² These were people that Collins identified as “Level Five Leaders” - and there are very few of them, and there is no higher level. They possess “humility and fierce resolve”, because humility is multi-dimensional and includes self-understanding, awareness, openness, passion and perspective. He continues,

“the most powerfully transformative executives possess a paradoxical mixture of personal humility and professional will. They are timid and ferocious. Shy and fearless. They are rare - and unstoppable”.³

¹ Justine Allain Chapman, *The Resilient Disciple: A Lenten Journey from Adversity to Maturity*, London: SPCK, 2018, p. 111.

² See Jim Collins, (2001). "Level 5 leadership: The triumph of humility and fierce resolve". *Harvard Business Review*. pp. 66–76; c.f., Rob Nielsen, Jennifer Marrone & Holly Slay ‘A new look at humility: Exploring the humility concept and its role in socialized charismatic leadership’. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, vol. 17 (1), 33-43, February 2010); and J. Andrew Morris, Celeste M. Brotheridge & John C. Urbanski, (2005). “Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility”. *Human Relations*, 58, pp. 1323-1350.

³ Collins, 2001, p. 67.

Collins never set out to study humble leaders. His study was the usual business school fare: how a good company might become great. But what he found was that these companies were developed by modest and wilful people, who had low ego needs, and could often come across as shy, peaceable and quiet. But they were also deeply resolved and highly resilient. They were not especially charismatic. They were more inclined to give praise to others, and be quite self-effacing. Such leaders might say, “it’s not about me, but it is about we...”.

Their humility meant that that did not need much external validation. They tended to inspire with their concern for the small details of other people’s lives. They tended to look only in the mirror for critical self-reflection, but otherwise looked out of windows. Leaders who were the opposite spent a lot of time in front of mirrors, and rarely glanced through the proverbial window.

I used to remark to students training for ordained ministry that they had no job, and no profession to look forward to when the bishop laid hands upon them. What they were preparing for was a life that was an ‘occupation’. Our priests are to be occupied with God. And then to be pre-occupied with all the people, places and parishes that are given by God into our care: to dwell amongst, care for and love those people and places as Christ would himself.⁴ But holding such an occupation can only be done when grounded in humility. Status has no value here. Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt and in to the ‘Promised Land’, and his humility was a sign of his Godly strength and purpose, not weakness:

“For Moses was a person of exceeding meekness above any that that dwelt upon the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*).

It would seem, then, that Collins’ findings in the *Harvard Business Review* reaffirm the sentiment expressed by Jesus in *Matthew 23: 12* - “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; but those who humble themselves will be exalted.” We might also remember the words from the *Letter of James (4: 6)*: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”.

Here, I have a theory. Humility is strength; but pride can be weakness. And the key to living a humble life is grounded in grace and gratitude, not in grasping.

⁴ See M. Percy (ed) in Ian Tomlinson, *Clergy, Culture and Ministry: The Dynamics of Roles and Relations in Church and Society*, London: SCM Press, 2017, pp. vii-xvii & 165-175.

As the exquisite hymn in *Philippians* puts it, Jesus did not 'cling to' or 'grasp at' equality with God, 'but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...and being found in human form, humbled himself'. From that place, it was a life of obedience, blessing and gratitude: and of raising up those around him. Correspondingly, spirituality is essentially a lesson in love; but a difficult one to grade. But if you wish to understand and excel at humility, think of love as being something that is earthed in doing normal, simple, mundane things. It is not about the greatest kiss, or the most self-fulfilling intimate relationship. Because, as the aphorism attributed to Jesus in *The Acts of the Apostle* has it,

"In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' which teaches that there is joy in the act of giving when it is done with pure motives." (*Acts* 20: 35).

Love is rooted in humility: stooping to care for the small details of other people's lives. UA Fanthorpe expresses this sentiment in her poem entitled 'Atlas':⁵

There is a kind of love called maintenance
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;

Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget
The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;

Which answers letters; which knows the way
The money goes; which deals with dentists

And Road Fund Tax and meeting trains,
And postcards to the lonely; which upholds

The permanently rickety elaborate
Structures of living, which is Atlas.

And maintenance is the sensible side of love,
Which knows what time and weather are doing
To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;
Laughs at my dry-rotten jokes; remembers

⁵ 'Atlas', from *Safe as Houses*, Norwich: Peterloo Poets, 1995, p. 10.

My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
My suspect edifice upright in air,
As Atlas did the sky.

Wisdom consists of knowing our place before God. In humility, we are invited to occupy ourselves with God; and in turn, to let God occupy us with all the cares and concerns that Christ has for this world. We are to put others before ourselves. We are invited to clothe ourselves in humility. God gives grace to the humble. If we can humble ourselves, we may also be exalted.

The Crucible:

Many people will associate humility with the excessive and posturing character of Uriah Heep in the novel *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.⁶ Heep stalks Dicken's novel with his cloying humility, obsequiousness, and insincerity, and is often to be found making frequent references to his own "umbleness". Yet the truth about humility is that when authentic, it is often so natural that it is unconscious. Moreover, the humility is most tested - one might say refined in the fire - under persecution.

I think of the unassuming character John Proctor in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.⁷ Miller's play is a partially fictionalized story of the Salem Witch Trials that took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during 1692-93. Miller primarily wrote the play as an allegory - as a critical censure of 'McCarthyism', when the United States government were hounding and persecuting their own citizens who were suspected of being communists. In the play, John Proctor is a man of steely integrity, with a degree of fierce resolve, and tempered with cool anger. But he is a person of humility, integrity and probity, and it is this that Miller focusses on. The play dwells on the pressure placed on John Proctor to compromise - in order that he might save his own life. But the saving of his own life would only be at the cost of his integrity and probity. He cannot negotiate this away. So he submits to an unjust trial, and is destroyed by a social construction of reality that is mired in hysteria and hatred. Miller's play is based on the real John Proctor, who was an innkeeper and farmer, and when aged 60, executed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He was outspokenly

⁶ Published in instalments by Bradbury & Evans (London), from 1849-50; and as a book, by the same publisher as a single book, 1850.

⁷ First performed in 1953; edition cited: Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, Harmondsworth: The Viking Press, 1971.

opposed to the witch trials that were overrunning his community. (Unlike the play, John Proctor maintained his innocence throughout the ordeal, and was hanged in August, 1692).

I am no John Proctor. But I do know something of what it is to be tested in the crucible of false and pernicious accusations that attack one's probity and integrity. Such attacks can often be motivated by the desire to humiliate. I think of two examples here from my own life, where I have been threatened - menaced, really - with allegations that would have existential consequences for my vocation and identity.

In one case, I faced a vexatious litigant, who was determined to prosecute the college over a range of issues. In the course of their grievance, I was accused of being a chronic alcoholic, and incapable of fulfilling my role as the head of a theological college. I should declare that I am teetotal, and have been for a great many years. But such allegations are ruinous for the individual and the institution alike. The litigant lost their case, and both the college and I were vindicated. However, I still remember the sleepless nights, the loss of weight, the worry, the migraines, and the veritable 'pit of despair', as I faced the ruin of both my reputation and the good name of the college.

In a very different context, I have stood accused of being "immoral, scandalous and disgraceful", over a dispute with a college committee. In both of these cases, the accusers have consciously calculated the damage such denunciations would do, and assumed their menacing will result in bargain and compromise. That somehow, the very exercise of their threats would enable them to achieve their goals. Put simply, the end would justify the means.

In both cases, I have resisted these intimidating charges, albeit at considerable personal cost. Some compromise would have been the easy path: the broad way (*Matthew 7: 13*). The narrow path is sometimes to take a principled and uncompromising stance. I claim no heroism here. Only that firm, principled ethical resistance is also rooted and grounded in concern for the other, rather than one's (mere) self-preservation. In other words, it is not good for the perpetrator of the threat if their will prevails.

In one of the most remarkable theological meditations of the last fifty years, Daniel Hardy and David Ford reflect on how the ecology of praise, joy and

laughter is an essential component in the facing of evil, suffering and death.⁸ Hardy and Ford highlight the inadequacy of stoicism, and call for a deeper theological response to the wickedness, malice and horror that individuals and communities may face. They argue that joy and praise - rooted in our acknowledgement of the overwhelming abundance of God - can help us to face the darkness that threatens to envelope us, and address with a different perspective. This means anticipating the flow of the Spirit of God in our lives, and uniquely embodied in the life of Jesus, which expresses the ultimate overflow of praise to God, and the most manifest intensification of the good news of the kingdom. Jesus is, literally, the body language of God.

To some extent, the self-conscious kenosis of Christ anticipates this in the way of the cross. But 'self-emptying' here is not a kind of resigned stoicism. It continues to be, in Jesus, a journey of praising, knowing and joy; but which also faces evil and suffering. Golgotha is not for himself; it is for us. It is a kind of surrender. But not of stoicism and self-resignation; it is a surrender to God, into whose hands Jesus ultimately commits himself. The cross is therefore also an act of will and resistance too, for it refuses to abandon hope. Here, humility remains the ground of wisdom; and it confounds and further infuriates others. So we must know and remember that others may want to humiliate those with vocations to leadership. This is part of the costly path to lead and to serve.

Hardy and Ford remind us, however, that whilst patience, endurance and bravery are all important (in discipleship and leadership), this stoicism will not be sufficient as a proper theological response to the forces of evil that are sometimes faced, and the suffering that results. Daringly, they argue that stoicism can prevent us from really facing the intensification of shame that sometimes grips institutions and communities, causing them to transfer their blame to others. Here, they suggest,

“only joy can creatively oppose evil in all its perversion of both order and non-order; stoicism at best contains it, resists it and maintains order and dignity in the face of it”.⁹

⁸ Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*, London: DLT, 1984.

⁹ Hardy and Ford, 1984, p. 141.

And so they argue, it is only the overwhelming abundance of God - and the proper response of joy and praise to this - that can truly address the darkness that threatens to envelope. Moreover, there might need to be some recognition that the darkness itself contains some gift. By this, I do not mean to sacralise suffering and alienation. But it is worth remembering that the Old Testament sees the exile of the Israelites as form of agency that both chastises and purifies God's people even though this produces great sorrow (see *Psalms* 139, for example). Mary Oliver's sagacious poem ('The Uses of Sorrow') expresses this well:

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.¹⁰

To enter into an understanding of God's ecology is to see that in God, there is no darkness or light, but only one equal light. And so even demanding difficulty and apparent loss can be transfigured.¹¹ This requires, however, a particular kind of faith, hope and trust for what will be, and for what is: who we are already are before God. It is this kind of kenosis - a self-emptying in order to be filled with the joy of the Spirit, and the overwhelming abundance

¹⁰ Mary Oliver, 'The Uses of Sorrow' in *Thirst: Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2007, p. 11.

¹¹ My reflections on this have been greatly helped by John Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible*, London: SCM Press, 2010. Hull, as a blind person, argues that as the darkness and light are all one to God, we need to 'see' our challenges as disciples differently.

of God - that makes the way of servant leadership so demanding, and yet so very liberating. It is a different kind of existence to that of stoicism.¹²

Of course, the human response to attacks on leaders, and by those leaders, can often be one of anger and retaliation.¹³ And whilst such reactions have a certain legitimacy, the only response that we ever learn from the cross is rooted in the joy and praise that Jesus retains: “father, forgive them, for they not what they do” (*Luke 23: 34*), and which finally breaks the cycle of violence. Moreover, the leader is required – charged, I think – with trying to understand the unconscious forces at work in such situations of stress.¹⁴ Aggression in organizations and institutions can be expressed positively and negatively. In its positive form it is about drive; about the activity that moves things forwards so that love and relationship might flourish. In its negative form, it reacts with violence to those things that appear to deny or destroy the self. But when directed toward the affirmation of life and well-being, it can have positive personal and collective dimensions.¹⁵

Like most people in positions of institutional and religious leadership, I find myself more in tune with the Christian stoicism critiqued by Hardy and Ford, and less a creature of praise and joy.¹⁶ However, I live in hope, and acknowledge that as we journey, so we need to try and summon the courage

¹² However, see also Margaret Whipp, *The Grace of Waiting*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017. Whipp argues for the virtue of watchful patience as one of the primary discipline to be cultivated in addressing suffering, as well as discussing the shortcomings of stoicism.

¹³ On theologies of legitimate anger, see Lytta Bassett, *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus*, London: Continuum, 2007, pp. 70ff. On the place of aggression and anger in ecclesial life, see Barbara Harrison & Celia Robb *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. These are discussed in Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

¹⁴ Anton Obholzer and Vega Zagier Roberts, *The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organizational Stress in the Human Services*, London: Routledge, 1994.

¹⁵ See Kathleen Greider, ‘Too Militant? Aggression, Gender, and the Construction of Justice’, in Moessner, J. [ed.], *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996; c.f. Celia Hahn, *Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control: A New Approach to Faithful Leadership*, Washington: Alban, 1994.

¹⁶ Hardy and Ford, 1984, chapter 6.

to face our adversaries. It is demanding. I have met other clergy, academics and folk from other walks of life, who have been subjected to abusive bullying, humiliation and false accusation. In each case, the symptoms are the same: excessive weight loss or gain; stress and sleeplessness; anguish and anger; exhaustion and low energy. In all this, the accusations and the bullying cloud one's judgment, and also isolate the victim, often reducing them to silence. It is also very rare for the institution that is supposed to care for and carry individuals through such nightmares to act with pastoral integrity.

It is no wonder, then, that some of these victims find their anger turning to bitterness and vengeance. But I note that many in leadership positions do not take this path, and somehow summon up reservoirs of grace that refuse to do to others what is being done to them (*Luke 6: 31*). How can this be? It can only be done, I think, if one's own humility is lodged in a some kind of rich ecology of love and mercy, soaked through with grace, and then surrendered to the overwhelming abundance of God, such that our response is praise, and that we genuinely do *not* count others less than ourselves. That we do not cling to our equality (much less any superiority), but somehow continue to serve others. Moreover, that we also grasp that God's love and abundant grace is poured out on the underserving, and is not reserved for the self-righteous.¹⁷

For those who are the victims of dysfunctional leadership, this is an especially hard truth to bear. Moreover, if the abuse is vented from a pathological root, such as narcissism, this can be a highly demanding and lonely road to travel, as many of your companions will abrogate their responsibility, and desert their calling to exercise moral courage. Here, practising leadership, or resisting toxic forms of its exercise, can be a solitary vocation, and leave one in a place of (seemingly) lengthy desolation.¹⁸ It requires considerable inward searching, composure and inquiry to understand the nature of the individual and the institution, under such circumstances.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hardy and Ford, 1984, chapters 7-8.

¹⁸ See Paul Babiak, *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*, New York: HarperBusiness, 2006; see also John Fitzmaurice, *Virtue Ecclesiology: And Exploration of the Good Church*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.

¹⁹ On this, see Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow & Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Cambridge MA, Harvard Business Review Press, 2000; Roysto Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Kirstin Sahlin & Roy Suddaby, *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, London, Sage, 2008; Nitin Nohria & Rakesh Khurana, *The Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, Cambridge MA, Harvard Business Review Press,

So an ecology of grace (i.e., deeply comprehending God's full and unconditional love for the other), and alloyed to an appropriate and natural humility, might be the only way to cope with the projections and detriments done to us. For this reason, I admire Harry Smart's poem, 'Praise':²⁰

Praise be to God who pities wankers
and has mercy on miserable bastards.
Praise be to God who pours his blessing
on reactionary warheads and racists.

For he knows what he is doing; the healthy
have no need of a doctor, the sinless
have no need of forgiveness. But, you say,
They do not deserve it. That is the point;

That is the point. When you try to wade
across the estuary at low tide, but misjudge
the distance, the currents, the soft ground
and are caught by the flood in deep schtuck,

then perhaps you will realise that God
is to be praised for delivering dickheads
from troubles they have made for themselves.
Praise be to God, who forgives sinners.

Let him who is without sin throw the first
headline. Let him who is without sin
build the gallows, prepare the noose,
say farewell to the convict with a kiss.

To complement the poetry cited above, I simply note the plea of Stanley Hauerwas:

It is not enough, in other words, that those called to the ministry refrain from or do certain things; it is necessary that they be the kind of persons, that they have the character, to sustain them in the ministry It is not enough that a person is not 'immoral'; neither should they be vain, proud, intemperate, cowardly, ingratiating, and unloving.

2010; and Luk Bouckaert & Laszlo Zsolnai, *The Palgrave Handbook of Spirituality and Business*, London, Palgrave, 2011.

²⁰ Harry Smart, 'Praise', in *A Fool's Pardon*, London: Faber & Faber, 1995, p. 7.

Moreover, it must be asked whether a person exhibits the patience and hope so necessary to the ministry. For without patience and hope there is little chance a person will have the constancy to sustain him or her through the disappointments and betrayals so often involved in the ministry.²¹

Kenosis, Power and Leadership Towards A Theology of Humility:

In view of this, where might we locate a Christian theology of humble leadership? To be sure, no leader is remotely like Jesus, or ever could be. But are there lessons in his being that we might learn from? Here, I turn to kenosis – a term that generally refers to the “self-emptying” of Christ, and is an aspect of the doctrine of the incarnation. It is expressed most succinctly in the (so-called) ‘Christological Hymn’ found in Paul’s letter to the *Philippians* 2: 6-11:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

Therefore, God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Here we are faced with incomparable sense of God’s creative restraint that ends, as we have seen, in praise. Indeed, this call to humility and hope is rooted in the overwhelming abundance of God. The Hymn follows on from a meditative soliloquy from Paul on the nature of character in Christian leadership (*Philippians* 2: 1-5):

²¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In-between*, Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1998, pp. 135, 143.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

Theological reflection of this kind would have resonance centuries later in the *Rule of Benedict* (instructing the abbot), Gregory's Pastoral Letter (instructing bishops), all the way through to Robert Greenleaf's more modern meditative discourse of servant leadership.²²

Churches are, as Stanley Hauerwas notes, 'communities of character'.²³ In such communities, people are being *disciplined* by the grace of God into the new life that God, in Christ, has claimed them for. Such communities are not mere gatherings of groups with shared interests. Nor are they homogenous units. Rather, this is a 'thick gathering' of those being consciously renewed by the salvific action of God in Christ. Such communities have to be called back, constantly, to the exposure of "all desires known", and so that "the thoughts of our hearts" might be cleansed by the inspiration – the very breath – of the Holy Spirit. This has an ontological depth to it, as it is kenotic in character. It is only by following the one who "emptied himself", that one discovers the foundation for humility, and the space for joy in others, and in God.

Donald MacKinnon, commenting on the theology of Donald Baillie, states that "in Christ God is revealed as submitting himself to the very substance of human life, in its inexorable finitude, in its precarious ambiguity, in its movement to despair".²⁴ Correspondingly, notions of omnipotence and omniscience are transformed by kenosis. Jesus becomes the obedient one. But the one who becomes obedient unto death; even when that death is totally unjust. The obedience must mean that the crucifixion is real; for in his

²² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977.

²³ S. Hauerwas, *Communities of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.

²⁴ Donald MacKinnon, 'Reflections on Donald Baillie's Treatment of the Atonement' in *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie*, in ed. D. Fergusson, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993, pp. 115-21.

humanity, Jesus must embody it all in its fullness – including despair. This, argues MacKinnon, leads the church to living “an *exposed* life; it is to be stripped of the kind of security that tradition, whether ecclesiological or institutional, easily bestows”.²⁵ So, rather than attending to security and safety, underpinned by a fear or death, humiliation and annihilation, the church is asked to “let go and let God”. This means there is a potential unfaithfulness to the gospel when opposing any enemy or external threat that poses a risk to its very existence. As MacKinnon further notes, when the Christian God is endowed with the attributes of a human Caesar, the church takes on the image of a “transcendent Caesar” rather than the more fundamentally disruptive calling of embodying the “vulnerable Nazarene”. For MacKinnon,

“From Christ there issues a continually repeated question, and his Church is his authentic servant only in so far as it allows that interrogation to continue. It is always easier to escape its remorseless probing: to take refuge in the security of a sharply defined orthodoxy, or to blur the riddling quality of its disturbing challenge by conformity to the standards of the age...”.²⁶

What this means in practice will vary across individuals, congregations and communities. But what can be said is that all Christians are incorporated into Christ’s perpetual oblation. In being part of the priesthood of all believers, everything that comes to us, or comes upon us, is returned to God in confession and intercession - and then offered up for sanctification and blessing, before being returned. Christians are participative in the life of Christ, and in our own self-emptying, wilful descent and conscious path of humility, we are bound to an ecology of obedience rather than one of mere self-preserving resistance.²⁷

This, I should say, does not call the Church, or individuals or groups within the Church, to a life of passive acceptance or stoicism. Rather, as we saw earlier, we are to make the space for hope and joy, from which authentic leadership

²⁵ Donald MacKinnon, *The Stripping of the Altars*, London: Fontana, 1969, p. 34.

²⁶ See John McDowell (ed.), *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2011, p. 264.

²⁷ On this, see Jane Williams, *The Merciful Humility of God*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

can flow. So, this commits us to a very different vocation, and one that is far more costly. It invites us to contemplate the formation and habitation of the character of community or individual that is being afflicted or persecuted. But here, we are not asked to model weakness, but *meekness*. It invites us to utter the words we hear from the cross: “father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (*Luke 23: 24*).

There is, then, a paradox at the heart of kenosis. It is not a kind of weary resignation in the face of the malign forces of fate. It is, rather, an act of determination and resolve; an exercise of deep power from within that chooses – in the example of God in Christ – to limit power and knowledge, but not to limit love, hope, joy and peace. The path of leadership will be one of obedience, accepting that a conscious and deep form of humility will no longer privilege power and knowledge. Rather, these will be set aside in a continuous, wilful and generative life of humility, that will place others above the self. The self-limiting of power and knowledge allows love to both cover and hold those who need it most. Indeed, I think many parents will understand something of this. What the child needs to experience is a parent with *some* power and *some* knowledge; but not too much, or else growth and individuation will be stifled. But this can only be fixed within a paradigm of unconditional love, that seeks to sustain and serve the ones we seek to set free.²⁸ And only love can do this. As it frees, it binds us. There can be something apophatic about Christ’s way of leadership: humility preferred to privilege.²⁹

These insights, I think, have some bearing on how we approach the practice of our leadership. But such kenosis is, as I say, something of a paradox. Because the love can be fierce; just as the passion is a wilful act of determination, not resignation. Moreover, this love can contain anger, and even make space for disruptive acts of prophetic leadership. It must make space for peace, joy, hope, patience and kindness too - and so be formed by God’s grace. This poem from Piers Plowright contrasts the Christian God with some alternatives:³⁰

²⁸ For a discussion of this that pays attention to gender, see Helen Zorgdrager, ‘Risk-Takers in a World that Cries for Salvation: Behr-Sigel on Suffering and Kenosis’, in (eds.) Sarah Hinlicky & Aikatermi Pekridou, *A Communion of Love: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s Ecclesiology*, Geneva: WCC, 2017, pp. 127-139.

²⁹ See Jane Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond: A Beginner’s Guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality*, London: SCM press, 2018.

³⁰ Piers Plowright, ‘*Choosing*’ in *The Tablet*, January 17 2019, p. 12.

Considering the other Gods
Would you really want them round your place?
Thor banging about in the hall
Kali destroying the kitchen
Aphrodite coming on strong
In the bedroom - then turning nasty.
All tricky, changeable - to hell with right and wrong.
I think I'll stick with Jesus:
His half-smile, fierce love,
Amazing Grace.

Mind you, he too could send the plates flying,
Turn things upside down,
The maddened swine stampeding
Into the wine-dark sea,
The wrong pardoned,
And all that crying.

Still he's the one for me
As the world darkens
And drunk captains run the ship.
He's there, in the eye of the storm,
On the cruel tree, facing it down,
Throwing across time and space,
Beyond ambition, pride the dip of Fate,
A thin line of light
That we can grab before we drown.

Yes, 'beyond ambition, pride...and thin line of light that we can grab before we drown'. God's power is rooted in relinquishing and transforming. It is not kept or traded: it is given away, free. Human power, and much leadership, typically, takes for its own ends, merely to maintain and grow itself. God's power, located on a foundation of sacrificial love, hospitality and humility, builds up,

and is eternal. Human power, based on competition and dominance, is temporal and decays. As Moises Naim notes,

“even as rival states, companies, political parties, social movements, and institutions or individual leaders fight for power as they have done throughout the ages, power itself – what they are fighting so desperately to get and keep is slipping away. Power is decaying...”³¹

As I have remarked before on power in Christian leadership, and the relationship between the formation of character of the individual and the community is often a negotiation between behaviour (exemplary and otherwise) and (potentially problematic) divine-human conflation.³² Mixed into this will be elements of projection, along with fantasy, narcissism and the basic human fragility. Leaders should beware; leaders should be-aware.

Small wonder then, that the formation of character is an area now receiving increasing attention from theologians. John Barton draws our gaze to how much of the Old Testament wisdom tradition emphasizes suffering and the apophatic as a key to our development.³³ But so is, equally, the concept of *disciplined attention*: watchful patience, moral sagacity, emotional intelligence, vicarious virtue honed perception – all can be found in *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Ecclesiasticus* and the *Psalms*. Similarly, Joanna Collicutt’s recent work on character formation³⁴ helps us to see that good leadership is often formed through adversities that are stayed from decaying into despair and vengeful self-protection. Kenotic leadership, then is a form of being that does not allow negativity to germinate. To be sure, the true servant leader is often mocked.³⁵ Yet the self-emptying paradigm that is exemplified in Jesus leads to a humble kind of leadership that serves others, and. As Chloe Lynch argues, the kenotic is a form of extraordinary self-giving friendship that Jesus models with his

³¹ Moises Naim, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields*, New York: Basic Books, 2013, pp. 1-2

³² See Martyn Percy, *Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment, Communion*, London: Routledge, 2013; and *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Maps, Currents, Charts*, London: Routledge, 2016.

³³ John Barton, ‘Character Formation in Biblical Wisdom’, *Crucible*, January 2019, pp. 18-28.

³⁴ Joanna Collicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation*, London: SCM Press, 2015. Collicutt discusses themes such as humble power, the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit, embracing the pattern of the cross, and forming Christian character in testing positions of leadership.

³⁵ On this, see Michael Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, London: Penguin, 1997.

disciples.³⁶ The meekness is magisterial. The one who reigns, does so from a tree, and his crown is made of thorns.

Conclusion:

The homiletic tone of this essay is intended to do what all sermons and homilies aspire towards. Namely, prompt reflection, self-examination and some soul-searching. At the same time, to induct us into imaginative ways of thinking critically about the scriptures and our Christian tradition, alongside the challenges we face in our daily lives and complex social existences.³⁷ Leadership is just one such area. Our concern has been to wrestle with some of the issues leaders face - including the intensification of shame - and in relation to humility, humiliation and hope. And we have commented on the need for these to be addressed through greater attention to praise and joy, and the 'self-emptying' kenosis that makes the space for the abundant fruit of the Spirit (*Galatians* 5: 22-23).

In closing, let me suggest something that flows naturally from a person's leadership as a consequence of their humility might be kindness. Kindness is a rare quality, and it has been shown that in modelling kindness, and in creating a culture of kindness, this can have a positive energising effect, creating improved interpersonal relations and increasing commitment. Moreover, it is infectious. It is a named fruit of the Spirit (*Galatians* 5: 22-23). Granted, kindness requires balance, because it cannot recuse the leaders from making difficult and costly decisions. However, kindness does express appropriate concern for others, and communicates value and empathy in contexts that some can experience as alienating and marginalising. However, that 'kindness' is a term that has been absent from leadership vocabulary is both intriguing and concerning. Not least, because many will perceive it to be a sign of weakness, or possibly manipulative – when in fact, flowing from an authentic humility, it is energising and enabling. Kindness is important as a 'leadership behaviour'.³⁸ It is a fruit of the Spirit that becomes a gift to others.

³⁶ For a full discussion, see Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship*, London: Routledge, 2019.

³⁷ See Simon Western, *Leadership: A Critical Text*, London: Sage, 2007.

³⁸ See Gay Haskins, Lalit Johri & Michael Thomas, *Kindness in Leadership and its Many Manifestations*, London: Routledge, 2016.

I am mindful of Paul Johnson’s biography of Winston Churchill, and his call to heed the lessons of leadership: aim high and work hard, and eat your problems like elephants - one mouthful at a time.³⁹ But then Johnson goes on to remind us lessons from Churchill’s life: to be patient, and not let mistakes and failure get you down. You’ll have them. Learn from them, and don’t deny them. Equally, he counsels not spending emotional energy on recrimination or vindictiveness – because hatred is exhausting and draining. Leave room for joy and laughter.⁴⁰ And be humble; because this isn’t about you.⁴¹ Scott Cairns has written this poem on perspective in roles, taking the ‘Beatitudes’, and extending them into the terrain we often find ourselves journeying in as leaders:⁴²

Blessed as well are the wounded but nonetheless kind,
for they shall observe their own mending.
Blessed are those who shed their every anxious defense,
for they shall obtain consolation.
Blessed are those whose sympathy throbs as an ache,
for they shall see the end of suffering.
Blessed are those who do not presume,
for they shall be surprised at every turn.
Blessed are those who seek the God in secret,
for they shall hear His very voice rising as a pulse.
Blessed moreover are those who refuse to judge,
For they shall forget their most grave transgressions.
Blessed are those who watch and pray, who seek and plead,
for they shall see, and shall be heard.

³⁹ Paul Johnson, *Churchill*, London: Penguin, 2009.

⁴⁰ Here I return to Hardy and Ford’s counsel in *Jubilate*, 1984, p. 152: “There is then a repeated promise of joy and justice” in the life of Jesus, that addresses the “problems of life such as poverty, broken hearts, imprisonment, bereavement...destruction...in the context of good news and praise, and the glory of God”.

⁴¹ Lucy Kellaway for the *Financial Times* (1st July, 2011) notes how essential humility is for good leadership, and warns of the dangers of bullying and narcissism: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13974474>

⁴² See Scott Cairns, ‘Late Sayings’ in *Slow Pilgrim: Collected Poems*, Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015; and Mark Burrows, (ed), *The Paraclete Poetry Anthology*, Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017.

In ending here, I simply invite all who lead to practice kindness, and to be authentically humble; and to be charitable, even to those who might seek to humiliate you. Do not be afraid. There will be humiliations, naturally. But if we dare to wait in darkness there will be light (*Romans* 8: 18-39). Indeed, it is often in the waiting, hoping, trusting and kenosis that we are *refined* – reformed to become those joyful, kind, patient, humble, gentle and faithful leaders that God has called us to be.⁴³

⁴³ For further reading, I commend W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982; and Margaret Whipp, *The Grace of Waiting*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017.