1 September 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean

I want to begin this morning with a thank you, a huge thank you to those of you who over the past year have been so kind, caring and supportive towards us. In the course of this ordeal - which at times has felt gruelling - I can only say that we have felt sustained by prayer and love like never before. It has been palpable and persistent. And only occasionally patchy! This care has also been material. I have at home over 2,500 messages, cards and letters of kind support from all over the world, representing not just friendships, but also deep connections with the wider Anglican Communion, universities at home and abroad, and people and places near and far. There have been phone calls, flowers, the odd meal, many cakes, and reassuring hugs. ‘Thank you’ does not even begin to express our gratitude. It never can.

I think this care and support bears testimony to some of the deep truths that we hold dear in common: that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome. That love, hope, faith and charity are hard to extinguish, and endure. And in all this, I have been mindful - as has Emma - of our thick connection with the congregations of the cathedral, many colleagues, and the hundreds of staff and volunteers who work here, and students and alumni too. You have always been in our prayers, even during this enforced absence that I was made to bear.

So, to our readings. Some thirty years ago, I was preparing for ordination, and I found myself on a placement in a remote rural parish, 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, the discussion I was leading - and marking me for effort and expertise, and also trying to find the exercise vaguely spiritual and edifying. Because spirituality is essentially a matter of love, marking someone out of ten for leading a Bible Study is a bit like grading someone on their kissing. How was it for you? Sensual enough? Commended for your bold approach.
and infectious enthusiasm; but perhaps lacking finesse? (I don’t suggest you grade kissing like this, by the way - though you clearly can).

What I do 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, and as we edged round the room, we came to the Vicar. But he had clearly missed the point of the exercise, and told a long story about a time when he had been humiliated. Now, the difference is obvious. It is one thing to humble yourself. It is another thing to be humiliated.

Wisdom, as you know, as the psalmist confirms, is 'knowing your place before God'. Such knowledge leads us to humility, unless you happen to be a delusional narcissist. For we are asked to model ourselves on the one who humbled himself, and ‘became obedient unto death’, as Philippians 2 goes on to say. Christ emptied himself, and became a servant. His love is a kenotic affair: a self-emptying sacrifice.

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 this frequently shames us.

Now, you might think that humility is unattainable, and humiliation undesirable. But 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.

Recent research from Harvard Business School - a famous study and essay, in fact 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. 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”.

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.

It would seem, then, that the Harvard Business Review reaffirms the sentiment expressed by Jesus in our gospel today - “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; but those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Here, I have a theory. Humility is strength. And the key to living a humble life is grounded in grace and gratitude, not in grasping. As the beautiful 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.

Spirituality is essentially a love lesson, albeit a difficult one to grade. So, if you wish to understand and excel at humility, think of love - and yourself - as being something that is earthed in doing normal, simple, mundane things for others. Love is rooted in humility: stooping to care for the small details and concerns of other people’s lives matters. That’s why I like this poem by UA Fanthorpe, called, ‘Atlas’ (taken from Safe as Houses, Peterloo Poets, 1995):
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
My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
My suspect edifice upright in air,
As Atlas did the sky.

Over the course of this year, I have often had course to reflect on what matters. I have carried in my pocket one tangible sign of this. Here it is: a hazelnut. It is a reminder of those words from Julian of Norwich. She wrote:

“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. In this little thing I saw three properties. The first that God made it. The second that God loves it. The third, that God keeps it.”

In the days ahead, as we face many challenges in our country, here, and in the wider church, remember what I said at the beginning. Hold fast to God and to one another, and God will keep you. Stay grounded. Be humble. God, who is faithful, will not let you fall.
Our Gospel reading is all about knowing your place at table. To be clear, this is not an Oxbridge High Table. The example Jesus uses infers his concern about alienating wider social network of hierarchies. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was an all-inclusive table for the poor, the excluded and the marginalised – as well as the wealthy. But it was to be a common table – as at the Eucharist – where no-one had any real business to count themselves above others.

Wisdom is knowing your place before God. So, as Christ did so fully and completely, do what you can to be open, and occupy yourself with God; and let God occupy you with the cares and concerns that God, Christ and the Spirit have for our broken world. Put others before yourself. Clothe yourself in humility. God gives grace to the humble. Like Atlas, hold up the skies and those around you; and don’t expect to be thanked for it, or even perhaps acknowledged. You probably won’t be. But humble yourself, and you will be exalted.