

Commemoration of Benefactors Sermon for the University, November 2024

The Gift of a Generous Gaze

‘Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift’. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is very good to be here and to see you all this morning, and an extraordinary privilege to follow all those Lady Margaret Preachers who have, since 1858, delivered the Sermon at this annual service in commemoration of our benefactors.

Professor Sir David Cannadine, Alumnus and Honorary Fellow of Clare, in his introduction to *Dethroning Historical Reputations*, said of occasions like these, ‘it is not necessary to be an anthropologist to recognize that such ..commemorations are...classic examples of what might be termed institutionalised ancestor worship’. My central proposition is that, whether or not there’s some truth in that, we are called to something altogether different: something much more appropriate, more beautiful and more demanding.

Let’s start with some beauty.

Just as term was getting underway, my 30 year old daughter Facetimed me with her boyfriend. Now we are a WhatsApp family and my daughter never Facetimes me on her own, never mind with her boyfriend. It was obvious that Something was Definitely Up. No prizes for guessing what it

turned out to be: their engagement is announced, and we are to be the Mother of the Bride.

I have to say, I'm already panicking. As an erstwhile member of a busy church choir, I've seen dozens upon dozens of Mothers of the Bride burst into tears as the processional music begins and the service gets underway. Even we in my church Choir tended to have our handkerchiefs at the ready, whether or not we even knew the couple involved. When my own daughter takes her first steps down the aisle in south London next year, we're probably going to need the Thames Barrier. Why do weddings affect us in that way?

There is always something deeply moving about the solemn promises made publicly between two people who, usually looking unwaveringly into one another's eyes, commit to spending the rest of their lives together. There's something about the courage of it, a person making themselves that vulnerable, risking a leap into the dark and promising to stay with someone no matter what. There's something about the hope in it, that this vulnerability will be worth it, even if it sometimes proves very challenging and involves real sacrifice. There's something about the love in it, love which overcomes fear and uncertainty and the need for self-preservation, which drives someone to give themselves openly and completely, body and soul, to another human being.

And even then, there is one more ingredient, which I think is where the sacred lies, which is in the mutuality of it, each bestowing on the other a generous gaze, which sees the

other person as fully human, with all their charms and all their failings, but accepted and rejoiced in, just as they are. And there is, in the middle of the moment, a willingness on the part of each receiver to be fully seen, to be forgiven the inevitable shortcomings of past and future and to accept the other's gaze in all its generosity. It's moving, because something of exceptional beauty is going on.

Great benefaction strikes me as carrying the potential for this kind of beauty. St Paul obviously thought so, given that the Second letter to the Corinthians from which we heard an extract today is quite openly a pitch for funds to support the early Church in its mission, framed appropriately, I think, to underscore the opportunity that comes with a generous gift. Get a gift right, and it's a chance not just to make an impact for others but, in St Paul's words, 'you will be enriched in every way for your generosity.'

I've seen people close up making a decision to give a really stretch gift for them, whether that's a few pounds, or thousands or millions, and, on each occasion, you see the real joy and something like a sense of liberation that comes with it. It's a privilege to be with someone in that moment. That's one of the reasons why I really enjoy fundraising – because I think of it as highlighting for people the opportunity both to do and to experience a wonderful thing. Wonderful, but often not completely straightforward.

I am indebted to Paul Vallely, whose 2020 book, 'Philanthropy', casts light on the history and dynamics of charitable giving. He traces the first appearance of the word

‘philanthropy’ to the 5th Century BC, in the Greek tragedy ‘Prometheus Bound’. Prometheus is the god who shares the gift of divine fire with mere mortals and incurs the wrath of Zeus for his transgression. Philanthropia, the love of human beings, is a grievous wrong for which Prometheus is chained to a rock for daily torture. As Vallely puts it, ‘philanthropy was, from the outset, a risky business’.

The benefactors we remember today, the principal benefactors of this great University and its Colleges, each made sacrifices and took risks. The names read out by the Vice Chancellor will tend to be associated with gifts for particular purposes, important gifts which have, in their different ways, enabled scholarship to flourish in this city: various professorships and lectureships, the Botanical Gardens, the Fitzwilliam, Kettle’s Yard, this Church, the Senate House, and so on.

We will call to mind Lady Margaret Beaufort herself, in whose name I preach today, and who gave us Christ’s and St John’s Colleges. I also take a moment here to remember that the University benefited from the philanthropy of Lady Clare, who in the 14th century rescued my own College from its very shaky start and became its refoundress. At the end of a long list of names, you’ll hear a sweep-up clause, and I suggest we really own the breadth of it; when the VC says ‘These are but a few of those for whom we owe thanks’. Our benefactors are not all famous ones, nor their gifts so publicly celebrated or, indeed, so manifestly useful.

In the early 17th century, one of Clare's Fellows, William Butler, bestowed upon the Master a Poison Cup. The cup is betopped by a cut crystal gem, considered to be a 'talisman against treachery'. It was said that if the contents of the cup were poisoned, the crystal gem could be relied upon to discolour or even shatter into pieces. The Cup comes out for each matriculation and I'm pleased to say the crystal remains clear and intact, which either means we've kept all poison at tolerable levels for 400 years, or perhaps that it, like some of our beloved Butler's wilder experiments, doesn't actually work! But we delight in our Poison Cup all the same.

A benefactor's gift, then, may come in very different shapes and sizes. But in each case, it represents an act of courage, that the purposes of the gift will be honoured and that the donors themselves might continue to be respected, once the ownership of any gift has passed from benefactor to beneficiary. To give to the university is also an act of hope, that this vulnerability and sacrifice will turn out well for its recipients, even if it proves challenging for the donor or means they can't make other choices with those assets. To give to this institution can also be an act of love, to prioritise, over one's own needs and wants, the needs of others to learn and to grow.

Some generous souls will have given in a way which is entirely unrestricted, for whatever those in positions of responsibility here might consider the best use for the time being of their charitable gift. I think of those as the 'keep on keeping on' gifts. They are not ring-fenced and so ask nothing

specific of the beneficiary. They show enormous trust. It strikes me that such gifts have a special value, even though their donors are seldom specifically celebrated.

We need to ask ourselves what such gifts ask of us. Because being a good beneficiary also takes work. It should go without saying that we owe our benefactors gratitude and praise for their gifts, and that we should use them well, to further the purposes for which they were given. This is a function of the law, of common sense and plain good manners.

Beyond that, I suggest it is not for us to settle for the bland and brief dance with fiction that is institutionalised ancestor worship, with which David Cannadine was rightly unimpressed. But if we should not be quick to worship our benefactors, neither should we be quick to see their reputations besmirched or their achievements diminished.

Lady Margaret comes to mind again. The epitaph on her tomb, to be found in Henry VII's Chapel in Westminster Abbey, and composed by Erasmus, loosely translates from the Latin as follows:

*Margaret of Richmond, mother of Henry VII,
grandmother of Henry VIII, who gave a stipend to three
monks of this convent and founded a grammar school at
Wimborne, and to a preacher throughout England and
to two interpreters of Scripture, one at Oxford, the other
at Cambridge, where she likewise founded two colleges,*

one to Christ, and the other to St John his disciple. Died AD 1509.

This reduces Lady Margaret to her motherhood, her grandmotherhood and a handful of her financial gifts, which, significant though they were, hardly does justice to the significance of her life; as arguably one of the most influential people in England in the fifteenth century, she was so much more than this. How should we remember her? As Nicola Tallis points out in her 2019 biography of Lady Margaret, two sharply contrasting portrayals of her tend to prevail – we either see the chaste and pious benefactress of Skelton's *Elegy* in her memory or the scheming villainess driven by political ambition to secure the throne of England for her family, perhaps even responsible for the disappearance of the Princes in the Tower. Whilst Tallis dismantles the latter theory, the overall bifurcation of perspective does illustrate a broader problem. How we struggle to take in the beauty and flaws of a real person!

This is not a problem unique to Lady Margaret. We live in a time when a nuanced but positive appraisal of a person known to have any kind of human frailty can be regarded as a sycophantic indulgence or a sign of weakness. In a 24/7 news cycle fuelled by trials by ordeal on social media – people are either good or bad, to be venerated or vilified, sometimes both in quick succession. The most evidently egregious of these judgments are delivered in a handful of characters across the Twittersphere, often from an anonymous source. Character assassination has probably always been a sport,

but social media has taken it to a new level, allowing it to amplify swiftly and dramatically, before the truth can begin to catch up, and after it has found its way not just into newspapers but directly and digitally into people's homes.

I know from conversations with students that this modern-day threat, which does not just apply to celebrities, can undermine their confidence and fuel their loneliness. If they get anything wrong, how quickly will it catch up with them, destroy their reputations, make it impossible for them to operate? Is it better to keep their heads down? Conversely, an atmosphere in which people can genuinely be themselves, can hope to be accepted despite their imperfections, and not constantly measured against an impossible standard, is likely to be healthier, more enjoyable and more creative. In a city like ours, in which we strive to be at the cutting edge of fresh knowledge, deeper understanding and new ideas, creating space in which people feel able to be fully present should be a priority.

For our benefactors in particular, we show them the greatest respect if we strive to see them as they are, neither to be reduced to their gifts nor to their shortcomings, but as whole people who, apart from anything else, did something really good. That is the gift which is ours to give them, the gift not just of ritual remembrance, but of a truly generous gaze. To look kindly upon them, as they have looked kindly upon us, to recognise their generosity and their humanity and the good it has enabled us to do. While circumstances do at times require us to recalibrate a relationship, even to step

away from it, that should not condition our customary posture, which should be clear-eyed, and start and end in a place in love. This is not worship, but something altogether different - more appropriate, more beautiful and more demanding.

Those of us who are Christian have somewhere specific to go for the role-modelling of what this love can look like. The passage from Corinthians leads us ultimately to the foot of the Cross. Walk there with me if you will and look up to see what I see: to borrow from St Paul, the 'indescribable gift' of the grace of God, embodied in the generous gaze that sees me and all of us, just as we are. In the words of our opening hymn, 'well our feeble frame he knows' and yet he loves us, for better, for worse, and is prepared to forgive us and die for us all the same.

Today we remember those who took their courage in both hands and gave to this great university when, with their significant means, they could have made other choices. Many people mentioned by name have now left us, but we continue to hold in our hands something of their legacy and their reputation. In many cases their gifts, well-stewarded, will continue to support teaching, learning and research in Cambridge for generations to come.

In a marriage of benefactors and beneficiaries, people can be thrown together, for better, for worse. Those who have given and gone before can do no more. Their task may be done but our task continues - not least in recognising them as fully

human, with their own gifts and their own failings, and to that extent, at least, just like us.

Thanks be to our benefactors, living and dead, for their generosity to this university. And thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Amen.

Loretta Minghella

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