



## Reflections for My Student-Aged Self

29 January 2023

The Lord Bishop of London

*Genesis 28: 10–22 Philemon 1–16*

‘I thank my God making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith which thou hast towards the Lord Jesus and towards all saints. I pray that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by that acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.’

Just after it was announced that I was to be the 133<sup>rd</sup> Bishop of London I preached at another college at that other university, Oxford. Afterwards over drinks the students asked me which was my favourite Bishop of London. I have to admit that at that stage I knew very little about the 132 Bishops of London and quickly passed the question back.

Five years on and surrounded on my walls by some of the 132 former Bishops of London I know something more about them. Like all of us, they are a mixed bunch and, whilst I still do not have a favourite, the only bishop that I have on the wall of my office is Henry Montgomery Campbell. At his installation at St Paul’s Cathedral, having banged on the west end door, it took some time for it to open. He was heard to question whether he had got the wrong cathedral. The delay was due to the time it took for the elderly Dean and Chapter to make their way to the West End and when the doors finally opened, Montgomery Campbell was heard to say, “My God, the Sea has given up its dead.”

The reason I have his picture on my wall is not just not for that account (though it is quite amusing – and we should all laugh at ourselves) but because he questioned his appointment to become Bishop of London because that all he had to bring was his gift to be a good pastor. Maybe at the time of my appointment I was not sure of the gifts that I brought except that I was a good pastor and I didn’t always get that right.

Having sent his letter to Philemon, Paul makes two very important points in the first verses of the reading that we heard this evening. Firstly, that there is a link between our faith in Jesus Christ and loving the saints. Secondly, our faith is communicated and shared by good works. These focusses are the focusses that shaped my student self. The choices that I made to become a nurse. And I would want my student self to know that that was not a bad thing to be shaped by or to aspire to. I think I would also want my student self to know that I should be kind to myself when maybe I didn’t get it right.

People often ask me about my two careers, that as a nurse and then as a priest. Whilst they have much in common, I would rather say that I had one vocation: that is to follow Jesus.

Nursing and being a priest have much in common: both have some strange uniforms! And my training as a ward sister with medical consultants prepared me well for being a civil servant and dealing with politicians and for managing bishops – but don't tell them that that's what I do.

However, more to the point, the commonality for me, is the link between my faith and loving the saints and sharing my faith in good works. And I suspect that the encouragements that I would want to give to my student self is a bit like Henry Montgomery Campbell: that is to know that I am called exactly as I am, with my strength and with my faults. And maybe I would want to encourage myself to spend more time to stop, to be with family and friends, and to stop and be with God.

One of the greatest privileges for me as a bishop is to preside at the service of confirmation. People of all ages, from all backgrounds come and affirm that they want to come and follow Jesus Christ and we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. As part of that service, I use the words of Isaiah, 'God has called you by name and has made you his own'.

Those words are there for me whether I am a student or today. They are there for each one of us. Paul wants Philemon to know that we belong to Christ, we are called by Christ, regardless of how we believe we are regarded by the world or by others, regardless of how we are treated by the world or by others. I wonder if we truly know that we belong to Christ? Whether we truly know that we are the beloved of God?

Our primary calling is to follow Christ. The One who has called us by name loves us: the one who calls us speaks our name in love, as he did to Samuel sleeping, as he did to Mary Magdalen in the garden, as he did to Matthew sitting in his tax booth, as he did to Saul on the road to Damascus. And he says to us, "Come, follow me": and the God who calls us loves us and is faithful to us.

I have to admit that on that road from being a student to today I have often questioned whether I am up to the task that faces me and lies ahead. But as I reflect to those who come for ordination, that God has called us with all our gifts, with all our insights, abilities and skills but also with all of our limitations, with our imperfections and our failings, and there is hope in the words of St Paul who says, "*We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*"

And remember Moses when God calls him to speak to the people of Israel, he responds, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, send someone else." When God calls the young Jeremiah, he answers, "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

Karl Barth captures that God-given dilemma well when he says, "As ministers we must speak of God. As human beings we cannot speak of God. But in recognising both the obligation and our inability, we can give glory to God."

Knowing our helplessness without God and our dependence on God is the foundation of my ministry. In the narratives of the Scriptures of the Old Testament and New, we see that it is often in the desert that the discovery is made, in the emptiness, that we can know our weakness and dependence.

Moses and the people travelling with God through the wilderness had to learn the hard way their dependence on God and at the same time God's utter dependability.

St Paul, the keenest of intellect, that great Master of Religious argument, after encountering the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, learnt to let go of his religious status – to see it as ‘so much rubbish’ in the silence of the deserts of Arabia.

So I am learning to trust the one that has called me, who has called me by name. He has called me with my strengths and my skills but also my weaknesses and imperfections. I have learnt that this is life-long. And I know that in order to live that life of faith, trusting in Christ requires me to stop, to wait, and to spend time with God.

‘Waiting well’ is a skill that we might all learn. Many of us find waiting difficult. We are shaped by a fast paced life where at least some of our needs are instantly satisfied. Our culture is programmed 24/7. We are busy – too busy to wait. Our minds jump from past to future, often failing to attend well to the present.

By contrast, our ancestors had to be much more patient about many things. Their lives were so closely tied to the rhythm of daylight and darkness and the turning of seasons. Night-time brought rest and they didn’t eat strawberries in February. So, we struggle to wait.

To be fair, perhaps all human beings have always found stopping, slowing down and sitting still a challenge. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Christian men and women began to move to the deserts to seek a more challenging spiritual practice. And as the persecution and martyrdom of Christians gradually became a thing of the past, people were concerned about becoming too comfortable and spiritually lazy. So they moved to the desert.

One of the themes explored by these Desert Fathers and Mothers was the human condition of ‘distraction’: our inability to focus on one thing and give ourselves fully to the present moment. They believed that interior silence and continual prayer helped to focus on what really mattered, especially when the mind wants to run away chasing fripperies.

Amma Syncletica was one of the Desert Mothers. She strongly discouraged restlessness, which she saw as a way of avoiding the real issues of ourselves and our relationship with God. She wrote: ‘Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or nun grows cold and their faith dies, when they go from one place to another.’

When we flit distractedly from one activity to another – from one thought to another – we tend to live in the past or the future. If we can sit, stay, remain in one place – both literally and in our minds – we have much more chance of living in the present. There is a deep connection here with waiting.

And maybe advice for my student self. I would encourage myself to sit and to wait. To wait for the clamour of the world and the many concerns of our hearts to recede. And as we wait for our hearts to calm, we wait to sense God’s faithful presence among us, alongside us and within us. Here and now.

And maybe, finally, I would want to encourage my student self to hear the words of St Paul, not just for Philemon but also for me and for you: ‘I thank my God always when I mention you in my prayers, because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the partnership of your faith may become effective as you comprehend all the good that we share in Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.’ Amen.