

Commemoration of Benefactors to the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in the University of Cambridge

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Ecclesiasticus 44: 1-15

We commemorate our benefactors this evening in this Chapel in the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity with a stirring reading from a book that is not, for the Church of England at least, part of the canon of scripture. The fact that we resort to the Apocrypha in one of our most solemn services might, both for that Church and this College, be an appropriate symbol of our somewhat troubled relationship with benefaction. In recent years, as the support of the state has waned, and the need to replenish our endowments has consequently grown, we have worried about the propriety of asking for money, worried about exactly how to ask for that money, and agonised over whether to accord more recognition to larger givers. And yet this evening we celebrate the most generous of our dead benefactors with a roll of honour and a *Te Deum*.

As I was thinking about this sermon, another even more non-canonical reading kept coming to me – these the imagined words of a future saint before he dies. “The last temptation”, T.S. Eliot has Thomas à Becket say, “Is the greatest treason. To do the right deed for the wrong reason.” If we are not simply to celebrate our past benefactors, but wish to encourage new, living ones, and do so with a clean conscience, then I think we have to address the issue that Eliot poses.

The quote comes from *Murder in the Cathedral*. Becket has first been tempted to re-join the King’s entourage with promises of earthly power. Those he easily rejects. But the last tempter encourages him to be a martyr, telling Becket, in effect, that Becket knows that’s what he wants to do, in order to guarantee immortal fame. Thus, Becket realises that what should be a pure and selfless act could become merely an exercise in ego. And, so, Becket’s quandary leads us into a moral question that slightly refocuses Machiavelli. Not so much can a good end cleanse bad means, but, rather, even if both the end and the means are good, can they be corrupted by a bad motive?

As you know, I stand before you this evening in a confusion of roles. An Anglican priest, yes, but also the chairman of your alumni advisory committee, tasked with helping the Council to help the College raise tens of millions of pounds. To resolve the confusion relating to the latter role, I’d like to examine whether this College can actually taint a gift, and the person giving it, by the way in which it encourages the benefaction. And, relating to the former role, I want to approach this question from a specifically Christian point of view, because for me it is the words of Jesus that present some very particular problems.

The commandment to charity exists in all major faiths, and Christianity is no exception. In Matthew 25, for example, we get the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus, identifying those who will be saved, says: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave

me something to drink". So far so good. But Jesus goes beyond that simple, though fundamental, obligation to others, and in Matthew 6 – a passage, it has to be said, not often read when commemorating benefactors – he says the following:

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Well, this would appear to rather effectively skewer every benefactor recognition programme ever devised. And it also puts us firmly in T.S. Eliot country. The commandment to love God and our neighbour, by helping those in need is not fulfilled, it would appear, if in so doing we seek – mostly? wholly? – to make ourselves look good, to win public fame. So, in this Christian framework, at least, the next step in the question would seem to be: can public benefaction ever be anything other than the right deed done for the wrong reason? And to answer that, we need to look harder at the issue of motive: both of the benefactor, and the effect on those motives by the tactics of the institution soliciting the benefaction – us, in this case.

The first of these appears quite simple in light of the quote from Matthew. If we give to make ourselves look good, then we've already received our reward – that is to say human praise, for whatever that's worth. But is it really that simple? I look at the Sermon on the Mount, from which this passage comes, not as a literal list of impossible targets, but as something that expresses potentiality that can only be realised by our acknowledgement of our need for God – a God who can release us from our own failings, temptations, sins that hold us back. And another part of the Sermon on the Mount makes clear that one of the most serious of those temptations is money. "You cannot", says Jesus, "Serve God and Mammon". But it's not that money is *per se* bad. It is neutral. And it can be used for the best of purposes. But it's what we humans do with it, and what it does to us. As St Paul says in 1 Timothy: "It is the love of money that is the root of all evil." The love of it, not the stuff itself. And that is a problem to which benefaction can offer a solution.

So, part of the reason for benefaction is to help our neighbour, those in need. That's straightforward. But, in the Christian tradition, another part of the reason for benefaction is actually also to help ourselves. To loosen the grip that money has on us; to remove the barrier that comes between us and our God. But that means doing benefaction with the right spirit. If we build the most wonderful student housing ever built in Cambridge, or endow a thousand bursaries, simply in order to receive, perhaps, a knighthood or an honorary fellowship, then we will have done no good to ourselves. Paul, again, in 1 Corinthians 13 says: "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love" – "charity" in the King James version – "I gain nothing." Our reward, as Jesus says, will be earthly praise. But for the benefactor, it is simply consumption. Nothing more. And they will be as far away from God as ever.

So the motives of the benefactor are crucial, but we would be naïve if we thought our methods of encouraging that benefaction might not interact with and potentially alter those motives. Our cause is good, but what if we do turn into Becket's last tempter, trying to make people do the right thing

for the wrong reason? We may have the best of motives, but we may, nevertheless, taint the process. An obvious example might be the selling of a place in this College for a very large gift. Or, slightly more subtly, what about those charity auctions where bidders – benefactors seems the wrong word – are encouraged to ostentatiously flaunt their wealth in public for the good cause. One doesn't have to be terribly imaginative at such events to hear the trumpets and see the street corner. We must carefully consider what incentives we offer.

So what does that mean for fundraising, for the encouragement of benefaction? Should we ask for nothing, and hope that, *sua sponte*, people decide to become benefactors? Do we send a polite letter, and wait? Do we mention in the most apologetic terms at an annual gathering how nice it would be if everyone could chip in a little? Well, I think we can go beyond that. We most certainly can ask, we can even challenge, but we need to do it in the right way.

Let me talk personally for a moment if I may. My generation in the early 1980s were, if not Thatcher's children, then certainly Thatcher's students. We didn't protest, and we didn't want to change the world. Very few of us went into academia, or teaching, or the arts, or even the church. Many more than previous generations, however, did go into the City, and many of us ended up wealthier than those previous generations. We, more than most, need to be reminded of our obligations; but we, more than most, also need to be freed from the thrall of money. Amidst school fees, and mortgages, and pension payments, we seem to be under siege, needing to work ever harder simply to stand still. Whatever we have is never quite enough. But what giving, what benefaction can do is start to move us from what some academic philanthropists call a mentality of scarcity, to a mentality of abundance. That is if we give money away, then we realize we don't need it. If we don't need it, then we don't worry about it. And if we don't worry about it, then we begin, at last, to be free. So this College – and other charities – both for its own needs, but also for its benefactors, should actively encourage giving out of abundance.

I come back one final time to what Eliot had Thomas à Becket say. There is so much good to be done by encouraging benefaction, both for the giver and the receiver. So, in the face of this, what would constitute the greatest treason? What is the wrong reason? Does anything that the College might do publicly through recognition to encourage benefactors potentially taint the benefaction? I don't think so. I don't believe that Jesus' words in Matthew 6 mean that all almsgiving must be done in private, and that doing it publicly precludes the possibility of a good intention. It's doing it in public for a bad reason, for the wrong reason, that Jesus criticises. So that is not a prohibition on us encouraging donors by offering some type of recognition.

But there is a much more positive reason for acknowledging benefaction publicly. Judicious displays – not excessive, not grotesque, no loud trumpets – but judicious displays of public giving will often encourage others to give. Not to go one better, not to appear more pious, but simply because it seems the right thing to do. If we see our friends do it, if we see our peers do it, if we see people whom we admire and like do it, if it becomes the norm, then we are more likely to do it ourselves. It is that collective encouragement that makes this into a virtuous circle. And that must, by its nature, be public, and in some way recognised.

So that, in the end, is why Ecclesiasticus – canonical or not – is a good reading for this occasion. Not because it encourages us to aspire to be famous men, or to seek glory, but because this strand of wisdom literature places us in a broader societal and historical context where we are supported not only by the actions of our own generation, but those past, and those still to come. So this evening we commemorate, we celebrate, not the possible mixed motives of Henry VIII, or of any other individual benefactor. Rather, we come to celebrate the example of all our benefactors who provide us with the context and support that we need to become benefactors ourselves, with all the good that will do for this College, and for all the good it will do for us. “So, let us now praise famous men . . .”

Amen