

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



ST BARTHOLOMEW

24 August 2025

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

When I was young, my mum was very skilful at responding to the favourite child challenge. We regularly asked Mum who was her favourite child. Or one of us would accuse her of favouring one of the others. She would always reply, “you are my favourite Mark”, “you are my favourite Rachel”, “you are my favourite Ruth”, and so on.

“A dispute arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” In Luke’s gospel this comes immediately after Jesus has told the disciples that one of them will betray him. They begin to ask one another which one of them would do this.

The GOAT disciple dispute makes us smile because it is so familiar, so human. As one T-shirt says, “Jesus loves you, but I’m his favourite.” Jesus responds to the disciples by pointing them, as he points us, to the way of service and humility, “the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves”.

The way of humility is at the heart of the Rule of Saint Benedict – the rule which guides the lives of Benedictine nuns and monks around the world, and at the heart of our heritage here. Benedict uses the image of a ladder to describe our ascent to heaven via the 12 steps of humility. It’s in Chapter 7 of the Rule and it’s not for the faint-hearted. “The goals and values of the spiritual life, are just plain different from the goals and values we’ve been taught by the world around us. Winning, owning, having, consuming, and controlling are not the high posts of the spiritual life. And this is the basis for social revolution in the modern world.”¹ That’s the view of Joan Chittister, Benedictine nun and writer. In her commentary on the Rule she says, “If the modern age has lost anything that needs to be rediscovered, if the Western world has denied anything that needs to be owned, if individuals have rejected anything that needs to be professed again, if the preservation of the globe in the 21st century requires anything of the past at all, it may well be the commitment of the Rule of Benedict to humility.”² “Humility is the ground of growth and graced relationships on earth. Humility is what makes the powerful accessible to the power-less. Humility is what allows poor nations [to make demands of rich ones]. Humility is what enables the learned to learn from the wise.”³

Benedict’s 12 steps of humility are challenging and unsettling in our culture that idolises self-fulfilment and promotes self-expression. For example, “The fourth step of humility is that we are obedient to the Abbot under difficult, unfavourable, or even unjust conditions, and our hearts quietly embrace suffering and endure it without weakening or seeking escape.”⁴ Even when the Abbot is harsh or unjust obedience is required without complaint! Or “The sixth step of humility is that we are content with the lowest and most menial treatment, and regard ourselves as a poor and worthless worker in whatever task we are given”⁵ Yikes! These steps take some careful reflection with our understanding of healthy church culture and safeguarding.

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict, A Spirituality for the 21st Century* p.78

² *Ibid* p.76

³ *Ibid* p.94

⁴ *Ibid* p.85

⁵ *Ibid* p.89

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But the steps of humility about speech may be more relatable – ones we might adopt. “The ninth step of humility is that we control our tongues and remain silent, not speaking unless asked a question, for scripture warns, “In a flood of words you will not avoid sinning”⁶ With a little reflection, I notice how often my motive for speaking is trying to impress, or needing to be right, or just wanting to be funny. Humility reminds us to listen more: two ears, one mouth. “Most of us have no chance of mirroring Christ unless we honestly acknowledge how full we are with our own preoccupations and how we cling to them.”⁷

On my recent trip to Tanzania, to our link diocese of Kagera, I met Revd Canon Dr George Otieno. George is an impressive man. He is the Provincial Secretary for the Anglican church in Tanzania, which means he works closely with the Archbishop of Tanzania. His PhD is from this country, in English his second language. Yet George is a person of great humility. He says don’t look at me in an important role now, look at my life story. For George, everything is thanks to God, everything comes from God’s blessing. George’s mother was a single-parent. They were very poor. As a child, going to bed hungry was a regular occurrence because often there was no fuel, no kerosine in the house, for cooking. “Don’t look at me in an important role now, look at my life story. Everything is thanks to God and God’s blessing. And that is the lesson from Christ who chose the way of humility.”

Joan Chittister puts it like this. We “begin the spiritual life by knowing our place in the universe, our connectedness, our dependence on God for the little greatness we have.”⁸ “Humility lies in knowing who we are and what our lives are meant to garner. The irony of humility is that, if we have it, we know we are made for greatness, we are made for God.”⁹

⁶ Ibid p.93

⁷ David Nichols, Holiness p.71

⁸ Joan Chittister, The Rule of Benedict, A Spirituality for the 21st Century p.77

⁹ Ibid p.82