



**OLD ROYAL
NAVAL COLLEGE**

GREENWICH

Trafalgar Day

Choral Matins

Sunday 20 October

11.00 am

Sermon by the Dean of St Paul's

The Very Reverend Andrew Tremlett

Mark 10.35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' ³⁶And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' ³⁷And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' ³⁸But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' ³⁹They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

I never cease to wonder at how interconnected life can be, but I hope that today you'll forgive me if I don't focus on our architect-in-common, Sir Christopher Wren, but rather on Lord Nelson.

Those of you with Navy connections will recognise my home city of Plymouth – I was never far from the sea, surrounded in school by students whose parents were serving in the Royal Navy, and then later I worked as a Chaplain for the Mission to Seafarers in Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

¶ But along the way of 35 years in ministry, one memory stands out in my mind, particularly on this Trafalgar Sunday, commemorating both the Sea Battle and the death of Nelson.

In the spring of 2003, I was stood on Cape Trafalgar - *Taraf al-Ghar* (طرف الغار 'cape of the cave/laurel') or from *Taraf al-Gharb* (طرف الغرب 'cape of the west')¹ – with a civic and church group from the City of Portsmouth as an advanced party preparing for the bicentennial commemoration of the Battle of Trafalgar a couple of years later, an event which many here will, I'm sure, recall.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Trafalgar

I think my official title should have been bag-carrier and bottle-washer, but at the time I was Chaplain to the Bishop of Portsmouth, the legendary Kenneth Stevenson, and was travelling with the then Deputy Director of the Royal Navy Museum, Dr Colin White. I was pleased to see that Colin (now sadly deceased) was the author of the Nelson Society's on-line resource.

The purpose of the visit was to engage the civic authorities in Cadiz to support the 200th anniversary commemorations, which included crew members of HMS Chatham representing the Royal Navy in ceremonies in Cadiz.

Stood on Cape Trafalgar, my abiding memory is of looking out to sea and imagining the battle which took place over the horizon, and as we stood there, birds migrating from North Africa, catapulted by the prevailing winds, swept over our heads.

So to be preaching here, where Nelson's body arrived on 23 December 1805 and lay in state in the Painted Hall from 5 to 7 January 1806, is quite a circle. After spending the night before the funeral at the Admiralty, the next day his body he was taken through the streets to St Paul's Cathedral where it now rests.

⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

As Colin White wrote², Nelson was a devout Christian: he learned the faith from his father, the parish priest of Burnham Thorpe, and that faith gave him great inner strength.

He said his prayers every day and as the *Victory* sailed into battle at Trafalgar he was on his knees writing the famous prayer, which is still read out every Trafalgar day:

² <https://nelson-society.com/about-the-society/>

May the Great God whom I worship, grant to my Country and for the benefit of Europe in general a great and glorious victory;

and may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it;

and may humanity after victory be the predominant feature of the British Fleet.

For myself individually I commit my life to Him who made me and may his blessing alight upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully.

To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted to me to defend.

Amen, Amen, Amen.

But the purpose of this sermon is not an encomium, a litany of praise – many of you are far more expert – but rather to reflect on the nature of humanity and what it means to be what we might now call a ‘complex hero’.

The backdrop to the conflict between France and Britain was, of course, trade and, in particular, trade in the West Indies associated with enslaved people and the plantations they were forced to work on, with Villeneuve and Nelson criss-crossing the Atlantic, in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse.

Almost half of France's foreign trade was generated in the West Indies, and a quarter of her merchant tonnage and a third of all her seaman relied on it. These issues were slightly less significant for Britain, whose dominions there employed an eighth of her merchant tonnage and generated 20% of her trade.

Nevertheless, for either country, the loss of their islands would have created a serious financial problem.

This interconnectedness between the sea battles that made Nelson's name, and the trade it was protecting is highlighted in a recent trail around the monuments in St

Paul's Cathedral associated with the '*War and Resistance in the Caribbean*'³, working with community groups from St Vincent and the Grenadines, highlighting the stories of those indigenous and enslaved peoples who lived on the islands, and whose descendants are now very much part of British life.

All this is to say that in giving rightful honour to a hero like Nelson, we are recognising the complexity of the human condition in each one of us. That tapestry which forms our character and our soul, which speaks of dreams and desires, aspirations and longings, of pain and failure, pride and fear.

³ <https://www.stpauls.co.uk/war-and-resistance-in-caribbean-monuments-st-pauls>

¶ Turning to scripture, for all our reverence of Jesus' first disciples, the scene in our New Testament reading is testament to the enduring nature of the human condition.

James and John competing over who is going to be top dog - can we have the best seats in the house?

And when the 10 other disciples heard about the brothers' request to be seated at Christ's right hand and left in glory, their response was completely understandable and undeniably human.

But Jesus uses this mis-step by James and John not to crush them or to make them look foolish, rather his deep understanding of what it is to be human leads him in a different direction:

'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

This is something which is often referred to as ‘servant leadership’ – the idea that true service lies in laying aside the trappings of power, and, as St Paul says in the letter to the Philippians:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.⁴

⁴ <https://bible.oremus.org/?ql=326728332>

But we should not deceive ourselves. I tell the story against myself that, earlier in the year, I was invited to give one of the Select Sermons at Oxford University. The title is historic and chosen for you: mine was to preach 'On the Grace of Humility'. Let's just say that anyone who knows me found a certain difficulty in suppressing a smile.

To exercise leadership with humanity and faith is truly to follow in the footsteps of Christ: and for this Nelson is rightly honoured.

⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

[1257 words]