



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 7th May 2023

Reading: Acts 7.55-60

Easter V: Induction of Elders and Officers

King Henry IV reigned from 1399-1413. Shakespeare's depiction of him strikes a contemporary note. We learn of a monarch upon whom the burden of office weighs heavily, leading to insomnia. He has opponents who don't think he should be king; maybe that there shouldn't be a king at all. There's nationalist unrest in Scotland, and in Wales, too, where Owen Glendower flexes his Celtic muscles. Henry IV's family is riven, and there's a particularly vexing son named Harry.

In a poignant moment, when he wonders what the future holds, and he envies others their trouble-free lives, he asks, '*How many thousand of my poorest subjects//Are at this hour asleep*', and, a little later, laments, '*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*'¹

Despite the smiles and waves of yesterday, I can't see how a contemporary monarch avoids such moments. Nor a President, Premier or Cambridge City Councillor. For me, it's why St Paul stresses that part of the Church's place in the world is to pray for those who lead us, those who have authority over us, those who serve us.²

To pray for them whether or not we favour the constitutional system that put them there. So today we pray for our King, our Parliament, and our City Council, because they all (like each of us) need the wisdom, rectitude and compassion, the willingness to be a servant, that make such office-bearing effective and fruitful, and most especially might we pray when the responsibility they bear means their head lies uneasy and wakeful upon their bed.

And so it is in the Church, too. Christian leadership is always a privilege. Decades after I was first accepted for training as a minister, I continue to marvel at the trust God and the Church place in me. Even now, I have to pinch myself to make sure that it is true and not a fanciful dream. And maybe that incredulity sums up how Owen, Margaret and Ian, Daphne and Jenny have felt in the offices they have held in these early years of Downing Place Church, just as in all they did for Emmanuel and St Columba's before that - amazed, yet grateful, too, for the privilege God and their fellow members bestowed upon them.

But in truth, at the same time these are very difficult days for the church, and not least to be a leader in its life. How I feel today for our friends at Castle Camps United Reformed Church, who with sadness have discerned that with severe building problems, this is the moment to close. I will be in the congregation this evening for their final service.

But even those of us who give the appearance of thriving are having to discover afresh what we are called to be in a world that has so altered its approach to us that we can feel disablingly 'bothered and bewildered.'³ And if we are really honest, many people's confidence in God, even as devout Christians, has become diluted. Blessed though Downing Place Church is with resources of people rich in Christian experience, of premises and money, navigating our place in this city is a constant challenge – an *exciting* one, but a challenge nonetheless. Moreover, this church requires lots of people to give generously of their money, if it is to achieve everything to which it aspires. So it is that church leaders shouldering such responsibility might echo the Bard's Henry IVth: '*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown*'. And that is why the vocation of us all is constantly to hold in prayer those whom we have elected to succeed Jenny and Daphne, Margaret, Ian and Owen. Pippa, Augur and William, with Alison and Robert, are not here to do things *for* us but *with* us. Part of what all of

¹ Shakespeare, William 1599 *Henry IV, Part 2* Act3. Scene 1

² I Timothy 2.1-4

³ Morisy, Ann 2009 *Bothered and Bewildered: enacting hope in troubled times* London: Continuum page 102

us undertake today is that support and encouragement which is embodied in practical help and careful prayer.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles was not, on a superficial reading, entirely inspiring. The stoning of an early church leader might seem a discouraging example for those to be inducted today, or crowned yesterday. But *is* it quite so unhelpful?

What we have here is a model of how to serve with boldness, grace, and faith, and whether our place of service is on a throne, in a council chamber, or at the Lord's Table, we will need boldness, grace, and faith. Stephen is bold in the face of challenge and trouble; he is gracious in the face of deliberate misunderstanding and opposition. And he is full of faith as he faces death. At this point, you and I might counter with the protestation that we are not like Stephen. Ours is a more modest role; a lower profile, a less dramatic discipleship. We're not going to get a mention in the Bible. But we *are* like Stephen – neither better nor worse. Just equally dependent upon what it was that enabled him to be a person of boldness, grace and faith. Remember how the reading began, 'filled with the Holy Spirit' ... That's the secret.

The Holy Spirit, God alive and active amongst us here and now, is the source of our faith and trust, come what may, of our knowledge and wisdom in this demanding era, of our adventure and risk-taking enterprise in serving God's mission; the Holy Spirit stirs our compassion and love for neighbour and stranger alike, and enables that interdependent teamwork by which, jig-saw like, we each add our gifts and play our varying parts.

Yesterday, the Holy Spirit was invoked for King Charles: '*Our Lord Jesus Christ, pour down upon your head and Heart the blessing of the Holy Spirit, and prosper the work of your Hands ...*'⁴

In a similar way, we ask the Holy Spirit's gifts and graces for Alison, Augur, Pippa, Robert and William, and for us all today, that we might be encouraged and built up when awake and fully refreshed when asleep. As a former minister of the King's Weigh House in London used to pray:

'Fountain of truth and grace,
who visits the world that your presence might refresh us, ...
come now into our midst, we pray, with your various energy;
whether as the rushing wind to cleanse and energise our souls,
or as the hovering dove to enliven our faith, our hope, and charity.
Keep stirring up your Spirit, Eternal Comforter.
Still let the blessed promise be fulfilled:
leave us not comfortless,
abide with us forever.'⁵

May it be so for all five of you, for everyone who elected you, and for me, until with the Psalmist, we can say,

'I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.'⁶

Amen

N. P. Uden

7th May 2023

⁴ from *The Blessing of Anointing* in the Coronation of King Charles III 6th May 2023

⁵ Hunter, John Eighth edition 1903 *Devotional Services for Public Worship* London: J. M. Dent page 242f altd

⁶ Psalm 4.8