



*Isaiah 40:21-end; Philippians 2:1-11*

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak today, and for the welcome from this church, St Margaret's, which is always wonderfully warm and friendly. It is also particularly good to have representatives of other faiths here as we are very grateful that should come today – thank you – particularly at these times.

How does anyone maintain the great virtues of faith, hope and love when many of you have just fought a hard campaign; the result has been surprising to many; and you are faced with the prospect of uncertainty, narrow results and huge issues to deal with – perhaps the greatest issues that Parliament will have faced for decades?

Combinations of exhaustion, of frustration, of anxiety, of fear, and of a deep sense of responsibility may easily provide a cocktail that intoxicates only to confuse – and like all strong drink may make the consumer more active and less co-ordinated.

It is always easy, and we see it in the press – particularly during and after elections – to mock politicians. But looking at what you face, I hope most people now have neither the desire nor the heart to do so. You have chosen to take on responsibilities that will have more impact on the next two or even three generations than any politicians in recent years, possibly since the 1960s. You face the task of reimagining our place in the world, and of doing so while holding to the values that make this country distinct; of both leading and serving, in a Parliament without a clear majority. Because of the size of the issues and the narrowness of the votes, there will be intense pressures towards loyalty, or at least obedience.

And we face a country divided socially, economically, generationally, and deeply shocked by terror and disaster in all its different communities. Yet we have a Commons representing the diversity of our nation better than ever before. We have division on matters of immense and generational importance; enemies abroad and fears at home; yet we have a basis of community that has revealed itself formidably in times of trouble.

We have politics rewriting its story, yet a commitment to public service from you that is the envy of many other countries. We have inequality and yet we have a national narrative of moments of coming together.

With such an important task, under such pressure, with so little time, how is humanity retained, a sense of direction preserved? How are our values expressed? How is what is best among us and in us liberated from the exile into which our fears and divisions could so easily trap it?

The first answer is that God knows each of us and he does not change. The Israelites in Isaiah 40 were addressed as a people in despair. They were living in internment camps for exiles and slaves outside Babylon. They sensed that God had deserted them or been overcome. That their nation was disappearing, and that not a vestige of hope could be seen in any direction.

Yet God does not change. "Have you not known?", says Isaiah incredulously. "Have you not heard?" Isaiah is astonished that they seem to have forgotten that God is not only over all the Kingdoms of the earth, but that he is the one who provides strength. God is unchanging in all circumstances, and to see otherwise is to believe a lie.

We come here to worship today, and to come into the presence of God, and it is thus right to get the hugely important issues of our day in this country nevertheless into the perspective of God.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" comes again in the first reading. The prophet is saying "wake up!". We may be weary, hopes may fade, but God is utterly different. We are to turn to God.

To see the truth of God rightly is the principle necessity of every human life. We see truth in the offering of ourselves in worship, in prayer and contemplation – not of our problems first but of God, of who God is. Start there and new energy will come: a spiritual energy.

There is another question when we are hard pressed, when the stakes are very high, when the votes are continual. Well, the whips are also continuous. None of us, even under such pressure, want to live in a few years ashamed of what we do in the next two.

The great hymn of Philippians, that second reading so beautifully read – thank you, Mr Speaker – does not ban ambition but selfish and conceit filled ambition. It encourages action, but action for the common good. It holds up to us the model of the actions of Jesus; of the powerful and at the same time most self-giving service there is. It is action with the mind of Christ. When we see the nature of God as Isaiah calls to us to do, then we find the mind of Christ.

Determination, vision, values, achievement are perfectly compatible with humility, the common good, and lives of service. It is simply that they look for a different outcome: not of quick fame now but of a name held up in heaven, of a name with eternal and not merely generational significance, because it is the name of a true disciple of Christ.

We pray for you in both Houses, as so many do, every day. Not with illusions, I say. You may not find it entirely complementary when I say there are about as many saints among the MPs and peers as among the Archbishops of Canterbury: that is to say, very few indeed. So we pray for you fervently, because we know ourselves, with respect and admiration. You have a hard path to walk. But the next two years are not about you alone, they are about you-with-God, and how you relate to God.

I know well what it is to work in an institution that has much of which to be ashamed, so nobody in the Church can look at Parliament and the politicians and judge. We come together as sinners. But that does not mean that we should give in to a spirit of despondency. That will only come if we are totally self-reliant; if we shut out the infinite goodness, forgiveness and faithfulness of God. This Parliament will no more be an inevitable tale of decline and despair or conflict than at any time in the past. It is what we, under the sovereignty of God, in care for one another – and above all in holy and selfless living, choose to make it – that will give it its history. Amen.

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