

Gravitas

Most of my grandchildren, including those in their teens and twenties, have never heard of gravitas. But they need to know what it is, even if they never use the word themselves. This is because their spiritual health depends upon it.

My favourite dictionary doesn't define the word, but simply says that 'Someone who has **gravitas** is respected for their seriousness and intelligence.' That is not good enough, but at least it's on the right track; my second-favourite dictionary says nothing on the subject at all!

So, being like you an inhabitant of this twenty-first century, I have just said 'gravitas' to my smart phone. Its instantaneous reply told me that gravitas is a noun, and that it means 'dignity, seriousness, or solemnity of manner.' An additional reply informed me that this Latin word 'may be translated variously as weight, seriousness and dignity, also importance, and it connotes a certain substance or depth of personality.' That's helpful; and that's what this article is about.

For my bedtime reading I am currently working again through *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. Yes, I still have the copy that I received as a Sunday School prize in 1957! Early on in his journey, as you will know, and even before he gets to the cross, Christian spends some time at the house of the Interpreter. There he sees a picture of 'the only man whom the Lord of the place whither thou art going, hath authorised to be thy guide in all difficult places thou mayest meet with in the way.' In other words, the pilgrim to heaven needs to know how to recognise a true gospel minister when he meets one. If he can't do this he runs the risk of being deceived by fakes. So what does such a minister look like? What is the first characteristic to which Bunyan draws our attention? 'Christian saw the picture of a very grave person....' A genuine servant of Christ has gravitas.

Once seen, gravitas can never be forgotten. As a young believer of eighteen, I remember reading William Penn's assessment of George Fox:

'Above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity of his address and behaviour, and the fewness and fullness of his words have often struck strangers with admiration as they used to reach others with consolation. The most awful, living, reverend frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his prayer. And truly it was a testimony. He knew and lived nearer to the Lord than other men, for they that know Him most will see most reason to approach Him with reverence and fear.'

With that quotation engraved on my soul I have spent my adult life on the look-out for spiritual gravitas in others, all the while bemoaning my own poor example in this area. I have not been looking for something merely external, such as the impression created by a well-cut suit, a deep voice and a slow, confident way of speaking. My search, rather,

has been for that 'inwardness and weight' of spirit of which William Penn wrote. And, from time to time, I have found it!

For example, I found it in three ministers who were the best of friends, all of whom took me under their wing during the early years of my ministry. They weren't men who fooled around, told jokes and burst into fits of laughter. Nor were they men who would have condemned such things. They were simply happy, contented, humble, and serious and full-blooded in their commitment to Christ and His cause. Each of them had a touch of heaven on his ministry. But what struck me most was this: whenever I was in the presence of any of them, I felt that I wanted to pray.

Somebody is going to ask me who they were, so I suppose I had better tell you. They were Paul Tucker of East London Tabernacle, Harry Matthews of Colerne Congregational Church, and Hywel Griffiths of Litchard Mission Church in Bridgend. I am glad to say that I have met many more of the Lord's 'mighty men' since, but these three examples of gravitas will always have a unique place in my affections.

Before we go any further, however, there are some questions we should ask. Is it right for this article to imply that men without gravitas shouldn't really be in the Christian ministry? Is such an idea biblical? Shouldn't we draw a distinction between what is actually written on the page of Scripture and what is nostalgically longed for by a well-meaning older man (i.e. me)?

When I hear such questions my mind goes immediately to the Pastoral Epistles, where all Christians, but especially church elders, are told to be sober-minded, serious and sensible (for example, 1 Tim 3:2,8, Titus 1:8, 2:2,6,8). But they are not instructed to be sombre! How could they be? They have eternal life and will soon be in heaven (1 Tim 1:16, 6:13-16, 2 Tim 1:8-12, 4:6-8, 17-18, Titus 2:11-14). A joyful gravitas characterises every obedient believer. It is therefore obvious that all gospel ministers should have it.

In addition, what shall we say about the holy patriarchs, the godly fellowship of the prophets, the glorious company of the apostles and the noble army of martyrs? Didn't they all confess that their homeland was a better, that is a heavenly country; and that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth, travelling to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God? Wasn't it this conviction that kept them from all levity, all superficiality, and the excessive over-familiarity that taints so much of Christ's church today? Can you imagine any of them standing in his pulpit dressed like a man about to embark on a round of golf, or starting his sermon with a routine similar to that of a stand-up comedian?

If speaking in such general terms is not helpful, how about looking at just one of these holy heroes more closely? For myself, I often find myself thinking about the 'evangelical prophet', Isaiah. He was both a minister of Sinai and of Calvary, fiercely denouncing sin wherever he saw it while tenderly and gladly pointing his hearers to Christ, His cross, His resurrection and His glory. Is it possible to do this without gravitas? Of course not! The

man who has seen the exalted Son of God (Is 6:1-5) and heard a word from His throne (Is 6:6-13) can never again be like the people who live all around him.

Surely this is the reason why a true, biblical *gravitas* is so often absent from our ranks. I admit that the following words of E.M. Bounds were written in another context, but they have haunted me through the years and, it seems to me, they fully explain our present predicament:

'The great hindrance is in the preacher himself... his inner life is not a great highway for the transmission of God's message, God's power. Somehow self and not God rules in the holy of holies. Somewhere, all unconscious to himself, some spiritual non-conductor has touched his inner being, and the divine current has been arrested. His inner being has never felt its thorough spiritual bankruptcy, its utter powerlessness; he has never learned to cry out with the ineffable cry of self-despair and self-helplessness, till God's power and God's fire come in and fill, purify and empower. Self-esteem, self-ability in some pernicious shape has defamed and violated the temple which should be held sacred for God. Life-giving preaching costs the preacher much – death to self, crucifixion to the world, the travail of his own soul. Crucified preaching only can give life. Crucified preaching can come only from a crucified man.'

When I read words like that, I am driven once more to pray from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer what I so often recited as a boy:

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.