

The Christian Code: Sermon at Graham Kings' Consecration as Bishop of Sherborne

[June 27, 2009](#) by [David Ford](#)

The Christian Code

Sermon: Professor David F Ford,
Regius Professor of Divinity,
University of Cambridge

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; Galatians 3:23-end; Luke 1:57-66, 80

*at the ordination and consecration of Graham Kings to be Bishop of Sherborne,
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A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'(Isaiah 40:6)



A cry and an answering cry! Our world is filled with cries. They come at us in many forms: screaming headlines, news of crises and tragedies, documentaries of war, disease, famine and cruelty, floods of advertising and the high-decibel grunts, squawks and screeches of Wimbledon stars; but also celebrations, recoveries, discoveries and billions of people worshipping worldwide. And then there are the cries in each of our lives, some loud, some secret – cries of grief, anger, blame, amazement, thanks, and praise. The world is a dramatic place, and cries signal its key events and strongest passions. Among the most important decisions for any of us are about which cries to try to shut out, which cries we will pay most urgent attention to, and what we ourselves will cry out.

The Christian drama, the drama of God's involvement with the world for the sake of life and love, has at its heart something like a code of cries. In this cathedral it might be termed antiphonal calls and responses. Think of it as like a genetic code, a sort of double helix – one strand of core cries to be heard, and an answering strand of cries to be uttered.

These cries together make up the code of Christian faith and life.

As we try to cope with the cries that overwhelm our lives and our world, and to identify which are the core cries, we are opening the secret code of the life God wants us all to have.

So, coming from St Benet's Church in Cambridge, which is opposite the Eagle

pub where the geneticists Watson and Crick had their conversations that led to the cry of Eureka! over the double helix, I want to propose a Christian dramatic code for the twenty-first century.

1 Here is your God! - Alleluia!

Its first cry is given by our reading from Isaiah:

Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' (Isaiah 40:9)

'Here is your God!' God is utterly central to the Bible and all reality. This is extraordinarily easy to forget. So we need to hear this call again and again and again:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.' (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

And what is our answer? The single most powerful set of answering responses is the Psalms, which are almost pure cry. The leading cry is **'Alleluia! Praise the Lord!'** which the choir has just sung. And there are chains of others: **Give thanks to the Lord! Lord, hear my prayer! Help me! Save me!** And perhaps most fundamental of all: **Lord, have mercy on me!**

2 Christ has died: Christ is risen: Christ will come again! - Come, Lord Jesus!

The second cry will be made by all of us later in this Eucharist. **Christ has died: Christ is risen: Christ will come again!** Those are the key events in the drama of Jesus Christ, past, present and future. He is the main character in this drama in which we all have roles. His cries are the ones we need to have sounding in our ears and our hearts: **'The Kingdom of God is at hand: Repent and believe the Gospel!'** **'Follow me!'** **'Blessed are the poor, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers...'** **'Love your enemies!'** **'Do not be afraid!'** **Come to me, all who labour and are weighed down...'** **'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me...'** **'Take, eat, this is my body...'** **'My God my God, why have you forsaken me?'** **'I am with you always...'** The good news is that the crucified Jesus Christ is alive and is our future. Our response to that news is to long for a future in which Jesus Christ and his love and compassion are central, as we cry out: **'Come, Lord Jesus!'**(Revelation 22:20)

3 Receive the Holy Spirit! - Come, Holy Spirit!

The third cry is about the most amazing dimension of life with Jesus Christ. If we listen and are open to this cry our lives are drawn into continual transformation. This is the quiet exclamation of the risen Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on his disciples in the Gospel of John: **'Receive the Holy Spirit!'** (John 20:21) The noisier, more spectacular drama on the day of Pentecost told

in the Acts of the Apostles (Chapter 2) include speaking in various tongues and Peter's proclamation to an international audience that this event fulfils the prophecy of Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,

That I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...' (Acts 2:17)

That combination of intimacy with publicity, the face to face with the global horizon, is vital to the health of Christian life and witness. The free offer of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, simply is the most astonishing and transformative reality imaginable. What response can be adequate? Perhaps only the daily repeated prayer , **'Come, Holy Spirit!'** begins to do justice to our thirst for a life, energy and inspiration whose reception only increases our desire for more and more and more, generating further cries of **'Come, Holy Spirit!'**

So these are the three core Christian cries: God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit. As we live hearing and responding to these, we discover other core cries. The dramatic code's double helix is longer.

4 Beloved, let us love one another! - Let everyone who is thirsty come!

There is a fourth pair for the church: **Beloved, let us love one another!** (1 John 4:7) and our call: **Let everyone who is thirsty come!** (Revelation 22:17)

5 [The cries of the world] - Your Kingdom come!

There is a fifth pair about the world: on the one hand, we attend to each cry of our world, especially the cries of the suffering; and, on the other hand, we cry to God: **'Your Kingdom come!'** (Matthew 6:10) as we long for and work for a world of health, justice, peace and love.

6 Hear instruction and be wise! - But where shall wisdom be found?

The sixth pair is led by the passionate cry of Wisdom: **Hear instruction and be wise!** (Proverbs 8:33) In the book of Proverbs Wisdom is a mature, attractive woman who is God's daily delight, 'rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.' (Proverbs 8:30-31) In a world of much dangerous faith and foolish faith, there is a desperate need for wise faith – among Christians and those of other faiths. Wise faith might be understood as the discernment of cries. How do we understand the cries of God and of our world, and how should we live as we attend to them?

Our response to Wisdom's call should be a lifelong search for wisdom. Our answering cry is Job's consuming question: **But where shall wisdom be found?** And where is wisdom for the discernment of cries to be found? The answer is: All over the place! Our hearts and minds are to be open to learn

from many sources, including other faiths. One of most important learning experiences for me in the past fifteen years has been Scriptural Reasoning, sitting down with Jews, Muslims and fellow Christians to read and discuss our three scriptures. We can also learn from all academic disciplines, cultures, media, from all spheres of life, from the poor and the rich and those with disabilities, and from children.

7 Graham, Graham! - Here I am!

But it is the seventh and final cry that brings us to the heart of what we are about this morning, the consecration of Graham Kings as Bishop of Sherborne. The book of Exodus tells of the foundational event of the revelation of God to Moses at the Burning Bush:

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said "Here I am." (Exodus 3:4)

The God who created us all calls each of us by name, and nothing is more important than that we listen for that call and respond. This is the meaning at the centre of each of our lives. Today on the feast of the birth of John the Baptist we especially remember John's naming and what went with it: his vocation of preparing the way for Jesus, being a voice crying in the wilderness, and giving his life. Let each of us here renew our own sense of being called by name – or, if we have not yet become aware of God's call, let us pray to hear it now through this service. And let us all join in prayer for Graham as he hears afresh the call: **Graham, Graham!** and, through his responses in this service, answers: **'Here I am!'**

We give thanks for those here who over the years have helped to prepare Graham for this new responsibility, through family life, education, church life and friendship. We remember those who have built up the church in Sherborne from the year 705 when St Aldhelm became the first Bishop of Sherborne up to today, all who have prepared the ground for Graham's ministry there. We give thanks for the varied, rich experience Graham brings to this ministry: his education in Oxford and Cambridge; his years in Kabare with the Church in Kenya; his building up of mission studies and the Henry Martyn Centre in the Cambridge Theological Federation; his doctorate on the correspondence of Roger Hooker with Max Warren (who served in this Abbey); his recent years as Vicar of St Mary's Islington; his contributions to the Church of England through the Liturgical Commission, and much else; and his formative role in the Fulcrum website and network, which has courageously, and with theological and political wisdom, made the case for an Anglican Communion that is a good home both for Evangelical Christians and also for many others, and whose unity is not to be broken but is to be patiently sustained and strengthened along the way of the cross.

We are also thankful for Graham's ebullience and fertile, practical imagination, and for his marvellous good humour with those who have from time to time had occasion to say to him: Slow down, Graham; entertain those wonderfully exciting ideas one at a time.

Arousing and Satisfying - Desire, Living in the Spirit

A word now on what it might mean for Graham and for many others here to have responsibility within the church at this time. We know Graham will be helping to shape the Diocese of Salisbury according to something like that 'dramatic code' - focussing on God and worship, on Jesus Christ and discipleship, on the Holy Spirit's transformation of lives and communities, on building up the church, responding to the needs of society, seeking wisdom wherever it can be found, and encouraging particular vocations.

That is quite an agenda. Much of it is about the necessary hard, daily, organisational work to do with things like buildings, budgets and appointments. But Christian leadership also has to inspire imaginations, hearts and minds. As you do that, you might take to heart these final, culminating three cries.

First: **Arouse desire!** God is infinitely attractive and intensely inspiring, and longs to draw all creation into full life. So set our hearts on fire. Stir our imaginations. Arouse our passion for wisdom. Energise our lives with desire for God and the life God desires to give in abundance. And make sure we are drawn more into responding to the cries of the world than into the internal problems of the church.

Second: **Satisfy desire!** The Christian code has to be learnt. So teach it - imaginatively, intelligently, practically and passionately. This dramatic code opens the secret of life-giving, love-centred, wise faith. So offer what satisfies people's desire for deep meaning and life-transforming relationships and practices. And above all teach the code book, the world's bestselling book, the Bible, so that, as you read it in the Spirit, it becomes as generative and innovative as the book of Isaiah was for John the Baptist and for Jesus.

Finally, **Come, Holy Spirit!** Dare to pray that prayer daily. Since 1906 that cry has been at the heart of the largest religious movement to have happened in any century, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement. That was a surprise. We do not know what surprises, perhaps just as great, are in store this century. We believe the Holy Spirit has more and more and more for all of us, in all traditions. It is the most risky thing we could do, but take the risk as we pray now:

Come, Holy Spirit!

And all God's people say: *Amen.*

Source: <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-christian-code-sermon-at-graham-kings-consecration-as-bishop-of-sherborne/>