Trinity 3 (12th Sunday in OT)

Matthew 10.26-33

You are of more value than many sparrows.

Yes, but *how many* sparrows?

In our modern academic culture that fetishises productivity, so aptly captured by the phrase "publish or perish", it is a rare thing indeed to find a very important thinker who has published very little. Peter Higgs—he of the Higgs Boson—once noted that had he been subject to such pressures, he might never have made it: throughout his 65-year career, he published fewer than 30 papers.

There are even starker examples in philosophy. Edmund Gettier is probably the most famous case, whose paper on whether knowledge is justified true belief remains a classic in epistemology. It was his second and last paper; after which the only other thing he published was a book review. But, for my money, John Taurek takes the cake. As far as I can tell, he only published one paper in his lifetime, but it is one that has spawned a large and lively secondary literature.

Taurek's 1977 paper *Should the Numbers Count?* is a notorious provocation in ethics, inspiring much argument, sometimes rigourous, often vociferous. The question of the paper is a familiar one: if we have to choose between saving one person or saving a greater number of people, are we obligated to choose the latter? And the answer, to most people, is obvious: of course, if we had to choose, we must choose to save the many over the few, and certainly, over only one. But Taurek disagrees. And, worse still, his preferred method of choosing which to save—the few or the many—is to flip a coin, thereby giving everyone, equally, a 50% chance of being saved. And he would do this, not only in the case of the one-versus-five, but even one-versus-fifty. For Taurek, the numbers simply don't count as a feature of moral decision-making.

He makes several arguments for his case, but only one concerns us this morning, and it has to do with what sorts of things are amenable to summation and comparison. Mass is an obvious example of a property of physical objects, including human persons, which is amenable to summation and comparison. We can weigh one person and compare her mass to that of the rest of his family combined, for example, though it may be impolite so to do. By contrast, a person's skill at playing chess is not thus amenable. It makes perfect

sense to compare one player's skill against another's, but it makes no sense at all to compare one player's skill against that of a whole group's combined. Chess skill is not summable. Taurek argues that some important morally-relevant properties are similarly unsummable, such as pain and suffering, and life and its loss. For him, then, it is not at all obvious that it is better for one man to die than for a whole nation to be in peril, as Caiaphas the high priest opines in John's gospel.

This debate has recently found expression in the applied ethics of fishing. *Shrimp Welfare Project* was founded in 2021, and is premised on the notion that the the suffering and death of the 440 million shrimp farmed each year is very morally significant indeed, not because each shrimp suffers very much, but because when combined together, even any minor suffering of 440 million individuals amounts to a lot of suffering, certainly enough to deserve our moral priority.

Perhaps that's right—but then we begin to make real comparisons. If we had to devote our resources to either alleviating the suffering of 440 million shrimp or, say, the 50 million people living under conditions of slavery, which should we choose?

How many shrimp are worth just one human? How many sparrows are *you* worth?

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If there is a Christian answer to this question, it must surely be that the value of human life and flourishing is incalculable, is infinite. There is no number of shrimps and sparrows that outweighs a single human being, not because other species are of *less* value, but because human dignity resists quantification altogether. Maybe this is unfashionably anthropocentric, but if so, then let it also be unapologetically so, Christian faith being rich ground for an uncompromising humanism.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith put it this way in its 2019 declaration, which caught some controversy, *Dignitas Infinita*: "Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance state, or situation the person may ever encounter".

Several theological grounds for this claim have been suggested, all of which share a common theme. There is the idea that our createdness in God's image is what confers our infinite dignity, which is a share in

God's own absolute value. The Incarnation then takes things up a notch: in Christ, divinity and humanity are united, and so our share in God's dignity is inextricable and inviolable. And the sacrifice of Jesus for us is yet another sign of what God deems our worth to be: we are worth dying for.

The common theme is, of course, that human dignity and value is grounded not in any contingent facts about us—our intelligence and beauty, our productivity and achievement, even our goodness and piety—but in the absolute and faithful love of God, who loves us in our weakness and sinfulness as in our strength and virtue.

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You are of more value than any quantifiable commodity, and your value has nothing whatever to do with quantifiable commodities. This should be obvious, and yet it doesn't seem to be, so dominant is the economic logic of our modern age, even in our moral and metaphysical considerations.

Certainly, for so many people, our self-esteem is tangled up in all kinds of countable things: the number of papers we publish, and grants we obtain, and social media followers we have, and sprockets we sell, or

whatever. And at a political level, it is now possible, even commonplace, to ask whether we can afford for the sick and elderly to continue living; and to rate and rank migrants according to their worth. [By the way, a Malaysian clergyman with a doctorate does not make the cut as a "skilled migrant", achieving only 60 points, under the minimum of 70.] We talk about war as *costly*, as if that is the primary moral problem with it.

All these are signs that we have, as a society, forgotten the gospel truth of our infinite and indelible worth. And when we proclaim this gospel in this world, we will doubtless be told that we are being impractical and unrealistic, and that we *must* be numerate in our moral and social and political reasoning. But the truth is that we don't. You are worth innumerably many sparrows. Don't tell the RSPB I said that.