

# Whatever Happened to Noblesse Oblige?

In the 1980s I served as the vicar of country parish of Brading on the Isle of Wight in England. One of my predecessors was The Rev'd Christian William Hampton Weekes—known affectionately as Humpy. Born in 1880 and educated at Charterhouse and Trinity College, Cambridge, he was the Vicar of Brading from 1935 to his death in 1948.

Humpy was a bachelor. He lived in the five bedroomed Victorian vicarage set in about ten acres of garden. He was from a wealthy family, and employed a housekeeper, cook, gardener and chauffeur-handyman as well as several part time workers. His successor was Rev'd Ted Roberts—who went on to become the Bishop of Ely. Ted had retired to Brading during my tenure and told me that when he took over from Humpy he moved into the vicarage with his wife and five children. When he announced that he expected the parish to pay for new church doors they were shocked. Humpy had paid for everything.

The old timers in the village told me how Humpy would go visiting the poor of the parish in his Rolls Royce driven by the chauffeur. If he was going out to one of the outlying hamlets he'd stop by their house and pick up the children to go out and visit their grandma who lived on one of the farms nearby. "Humpy would always have a bag of sweets for us, and we'd ride out to Grandma's then he'd pick us up for the return journey."

I never knew Humpy, but I knew English aristocrats like him. They were some of the most genuine, generous and humble people I've ever met. They may have been rich, but they were poor in spirit.

If Humpy was like the ones I've known he would have kept the

Rolls Royce because it had been handed down to him by his uncle and it would seem mean spirited to look a gift horse in the mouth. Also, if he didn't have the Rolls he wouldn't be able to offer young Watkins a job as chauffeur, and he knew that Watkins was a bit of a dimwit who couldn't get another job and had a widowed mother to support. Hampy would have considered a bright new car to be far more ostentatious than the reliable old Rolls.

Did Hampy have a cook, housekeeper and a gardener? Well, cook always catered for the parish events and housekeeper helped to clean the church. Gardener was also the grave digger and kept the churchyard mown and grew all the altar flowers. The fruit and vegetables gardener raised always found their way to the kitchens of the villagers.

Was the Rolls a luxury? Perhaps, but then few of the villagers had cars, and if there was an emergency you could always call on Hampy and he'd send Watkins so the car doubled as a kind of village bus service or even an ambulance.

Like the aristocrats in Downton Abbey, Hampy lived out the principle of *noblesse oblige*—which is a fancy way of saying, “To whom much is given much shall be required.” Aristocrats who were responsible stewards of their wealth knew their duty was to help the whole community with their time, talent and treasure. Such feudalism with the “rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate” is alien to our egalitarian age, but it is not inherently unjust. It recognizes the reality of economic disparity, understanding that you will not only “have the poor with you always” but you will also have the rich with you always. Recognizing that reality, its success or failure relies on personal virtue; but this is a universal principle: any economic and social system is only as good as the people within it.

Progressive egalitarians may sneer at the principle of *noblesse oblige*, but the way Hampy lived and ministered in

an English village in the middle of the last century exhibited the basic principles of a just and workable economic and social system. The principle of solidarity existed because the members of the village community lived, worked, prayed, and played together. The village was a network of extended families who fought and forgave one another and who lived out the drama of quotidian life together.

Hampy was one of them as were the other wealthy families who lived in the two country houses outside the village. These aristocrats not only provided the employment, they funded the local old folks home, ran the village school, nurtured the social life of the village, motivated the charitable works of the church and made sure no one was excluded. As they lived together they not only lived out the principle of solidarity, but also the principle of subsidiarity—the idea that problems should be solved and initiatives taken at the lowest, most local level possible.

In his own way, Hampy also lived out a third economic principle: simplicity. “What!—with his Rolls Royce, chauffeur, servants and grand house?” Yes. G.K.Chesterton wrote, “There is more simplicity in a man eating caviar because he likes it than a man who eats grape nuts on principle.” Hampy was “to the manor born.” He was brought up with a certain way of life, and for him to affect poverty would have been ostentatious and hypocritical. Instead he lived his life in an authentic manner—being a good steward of the blessings he had inherited in a dignified and simple way. His life was one of ordinary charity in everyday life.

Contrast this with modern charity fundraising—in which wealthy people attend gala dinners to bid on donated luxury items with their “donation” going to fund some administratively heavy charity which “helps the needy” by employing a staff of secretaries and social workers. Contrast this with modern philanthropy in which billionaires establish foundations to channel funds to government agencies to “solve problems” in

the developing world. by throwing technology at the problem. Contrast this with the typical middle class charitable giving in which we send a check to a charity that has mailed us yet another begging letter. These methods of charity lack simplicity, solidarity, and subsidiarity. There is no simplicity in these charitable attempts. We are cut off from the people to whom we are ministering and we are attempting to solve problems with large, expensive, bureaucratic solutions.

Alas, we cannot return to the idyllic life of an English village, nor can we all live like Lord Grantham in Downton Abbey, but we can learn the underlying lessons in the old tradition of *noblesse oblige*. We can remember that to whom much is given much shall be required. Instead of simply writing checks to large charities we can get involved in the lives of those in our own community who are struggling. We can treat our employees with generosity, respect, and concern—as members of our community—not just factory workers who deliver the product.

Through our local churches and communities we can foster small scale, personal initiatives in which we don't simply throw money at the poor, but get involved in the hard work of transformation so that they are no longer poor. Most of all each one of us can strive to be a bit more noble in our own lives by fulfilling our basic obligations to our fellow travelers.

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