

# HEAD LINES

*A message from Chip Denton, Head of School*



*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*  
—Philippians 2:3-4



October 2021

Dear Trinity Community,

How do you process significant coincidences in your life? Maybe five people in a week all independently tell you about the same book they are reading, one you haven't heard of. Maybe you meet a foster family just when you and your husband are praying over whether to start a home study for prospective foster parents. The further I go in my life with Jesus, the more I pay attention to these kinds of things. What is God up to?

That's what I asked when our seniors picked Philippians 2:3-4 as this year's school verse. I was there with them on the first day of school, facilitating and guiding as they discussed which verse to choose. I tried not to influence them, but to ask questions and move them toward consensus. As I drove back to school after they had made their choice, I was asking God, "What are you up to?" You see, last year one of our Trinity grandparents who had previously been an independent school head shared with me that he had read a book with his leadership team. I read the book for myself, and then our senior staff read it together and talked about it. The book: John Dickson's *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership*. What is God up to?

Dickson's thesis is that humility is not so much a posture but a choice. It is not self-deprecation, a way of putting yourself down. It is not cultivating a low opinion of yourself. **It is a chosen habit of using your gifts and power for the benefit of others—putting their interests before your own.** Dickson surveys the history of humility with an important observation: Humility was not a favored virtue before the time of Jesus. It's there in the Old Testament, to be sure ("I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit" – Isaiah 57:15), but in the Greco-Roman honor culture, it was no virtue to forgo making much of your accomplishments. Dickson offers the *Res Gestae* of Augustus as Exhibit A in the way the world thought of humility before Jesus. This long text, which was replicated on stone monuments throughout the Roman Empire, was basically Augustus's "Things I Have Done." Contrast this with Philippians 2, in which is the very passage our seniors settled on for Trinity's verse. There Paul may be citing an early Christian hymn (or writing one himself) celebrating Jesus's *humility*. This passage Dickson calls a "humility revolution." Any cachet that humility has today is owing almost exclusively to Jesus and the impact of his life and teachings on the world in which we live.

There is one more coincidence I'd like to share with you. I recently attended a conference of the Langham Partnership, an organization founded by the late John Stott. Stott has long been a strong influence on me, going all the way back to my college days when I read *Basic Christianity* and heard his famous Urbana messages. In

the early 1970s, Stott saw the grace of God at work in the majority world (outside Europe and North America), and he founded what became the Langham Partnership, a ministry that aims to strengthen the church in the majority world by theological training, Christian literature, and the development of biblical preaching. The model Stott insisted on, even fifty years ago, was the development of indigenous and majority world leaders and institutions of their own making. Stott wrote the introduction to the *Africa Bible Commentary*, a one-volume commentary written by African Christians for African Christians. In that introduction, Stott said that he looked forward to using this commentary so that he could learn from his African sisters and brothers what God is saying to the church. Stott used his considerable gifts and power to empower others. He was glad to decrease so that others could increase, all so that Jesus Christ might be praised above all. This is true humility.

What is God up to? Apparently, he is up to teaching Trinity School and its head of school about humility. What can we do to leverage the gifts and powers that we have to help and empower others? That is a question I'd like for us to keep asking all year long. I'd love to hear stories of what God does through his people at Trinity School to help us live into the mind of Christ, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped at, but gave himself up, taking the form of a servant, unto death, even death on a cross.

I spoke to the Upper School about this passage a few weeks ago, and one of our teachers came up afterward and commented that Augustus's "Things I Have Done" sounded a lot like what our culture asks of our students, especially at the end of their high school career. What is the college application process if not an exercise in "Things I Have Done"? What would it look like for Trinity to find a way to move our students forward into their next calling, without having them erect a *Res Gestae* in their own honor? Is that even possible? What would it look like for Trinity graduates to live according to Philippians 2?

These are not easy questions, and the answers may demand much of all of us—not only students, but also parents and faculty and the head of school. But if we are serious about following Jesus, wouldn't we want to find out what God is up to?

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chip Denton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chip Denton  
Head of School