

24<sup>th</sup> September 2022

XL

**"I have often admired the mystical way of Pythagoras,  
and the secret magic of numbers."**

Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (1643)

I'm fascinated by numbers. Take the Pythagoras Theorem, for example, the relationship of the three sides of a right-angled triangle: the square of the hypotenuse (the side opposite the right angle) is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. "The mystical way of Pythagoras"? It is to me – as it was to Sir Thomas Browne. And as a small boy, I loved Roman Numerals: IV for 4; XXXVIII for 38; CCLVI for 256; DI for 501; MMII for 2022. It delights me (saddo that I am) that at the end of BBC TV programmes, the production year is normally given in Roman Numerals. Wonderful!

However, when I come across XL on a clothes label, I know it's *not* a Roman Numeral number. It *doesn't* tell me that this was the fortieth garment produced. Instead, it informs me that the design of the item is suitable for the larger-framed person. XL has come to mean "extra-large". Indeed, there are also XXL items, and 3XL and 4XL it appears – ever larger.

I had a certain kudos in my first parish because the area was, arguably, the most deprived in the city. So I regularly had requests: "Come and tell us what you do." In the mid-1970s, I had two such "gigs" (as my son calls them) on successive Wednesday lunchtimes, in the chaplaincy centres of the city's only two universities in those days – Napier and Edinburgh. At Napier, I expected an "XL" audience. Even "L" would suffice. Disappointingly, it was "S", a small turnout ... two people, one of whom was the chaplain. For Edinburgh a week later, I'd sensibly lowered my expectations. An "M" audience would do. But I *didn't* expect "XS", extra-small ... *one* student. The chaplain, who'd invited me to speak, had been called away. Over two speaking engagements, my audience averaged 1.5.

XL? You wish! But "you wish" was exactly the problem. I had so built up my kudos and drawing power that I *expected* an "XL" audience. The adjustment to "XS" was a learning point for a young minister. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus says, "I will be in their midst." Thank God, 1.5 is also workable, when the XL crowd chooses to stay away.

#### **A prayer for today**

*Who needs the mystical way of Pythagoras when God's way is enough? Amen*

*An original reflection by @ Tom Gordon    Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>*