

Kings College Cambridge: a sermon for Henry VI

The founder of this chapel was probably England's worst king. In Henry VI's reign, England lost most of Henry V's French conquests, law and order broke down, and the country staggered into bloody warfare, as power-hungry grandees scrabbled for the crown. So few protested when Henry was murdered in the Tower of London in 1471, almost certainly by the future Richard III.

Yet within weeks there were excited reports of miracles at his grave, and soon candles were burning before images of "Good King Harry" all over England, pilgrims were streaming to his tomb, and a great shrine, which we now call Henry VII's Chapel, was constructed at the east end of Westminster abbey to receive his relics, once the Pope had obliged with official canonisation.

So, a paradox: feeble king, famous saint. How did it come about?

Henry had been a golden child, dominated from infancy by the overbearing uncles who ruled England during his minority, and he never really got an adult grip. He himself was decent and kind-hearted, but surrounded by hard men on the make, and his realm slid slowly into chaos. There was a recurrent streak of insanity in his mother's family, and Henry himself went mad in 1453. He made some kind of recovery, but by 1465 he was Edward IV's prisoner, and by 1471 he was dead.

It was a medieval king's job to administer justice, to keep the peace, to restrain the greed of the rich and powerful. Henry managed none of those things: his virtues were right for a monk, not a king. He was a bit of a prude, horrified by the mixed bathing in the hot pools at Bath, shocked to his core when a grandee he was visiting for Christmas produced a lapful of topless dancers to entertain him. He loved learning, and he loved holiness, and he loved the Virgin Mary. So at Eton and here, he built great chapels to the Mother of God, staffed by learned clergy commissioned to educate seventy poor boys in virtue and the Catholic religion: their main duty was to sing the praises of the virgin morning and evening, and the glorious vaulting here was designed to re-echo those Marian anthems.

But perhaps the least royal of Henry's virtues was his gentleness, above all his fatal habit of forgiving his enemies. He hated cruelty and violence in any form, even disliked hunting, but worst of all, he allowed even those who plotted to kill him to go on living, including, fatally, his usurper Edward IV. The sermon on the mount, by which he lived, is not a handbook for political survival. Then as now, the golden rule was bite or be bitten.

In the age of wiki-leaks and the phone tap, of Yes Minister and The Thick of it, none of us supposes that it could ever be otherwise. And yet we wish it were. Deep in every decent

society is the longing that those who administer justice should themselves be just. We want to believe in the goodness of a Kennedy, a Mandela, an Obama, and something in us withers if, as often happens, they turn out to have feet of clay.

The men and women of fifteenth-century England shared those hopes. In their world, rule was arbitrary, power violent, justice partial. Even more than us, they longed for rulers who were neither arbitrary nor cruel. But their hope went deeper than ours, for they lived in a society which paid at least lip service to the sermon on the mount. When they imagined a righteous ruler, they looked to Christ as their model. They knew of course what life was really like. They had lived through civil war, they knew Henry was weak. But in the murdered king's meekness, above all in his violent death, they saw the dim reflection of another murdered king, Pilate's Rex Judaeorum, whose kingdom was not of this world, but in whose days, the prophet had promised, justice would flourish, and peace till the moon fails.

And so the miracles they attributed to Henry were miracles of mercy and justice, in which the murdered king came to the help of innocent victims, whose plight he understood, because he himself was a victim. As it happens, one of the most famous of those miracles happened here in Cambridge. In July 1484 Thomas Fuller was condemned to death at Cambridge assizes. He had taken a casual job driving a flock of what turned out to be stolen sheep, and despite protestations of innocence, he was executed as a sheep-stealer on the Castle mound. In those days, a gallows had no drop. The criminal was simply pushed off a ladder, and strangled slowly under his own weight. When Fuller was turned off the ladder, he "commended to Henry his innocence" because, as he later explained, he had heard that the dead king was "the most speedy helper of the oppressed".

Fuller was pronounced dead, and his body was trundled in a cart down Castle Hill and Bridge Street, for burial in the Franciscan cemetery (now the garden of Sidney Sussex). Perhaps it was a bumpy ride, because in the cart Fuller revived, and once inside the friary, he claimed that Henry had appeared on the scaffold, and put a hand between neck and rope to save him from strangulation. So Fuller, having been duly executed, was set free. An early tudor publicity poster for Henry's shrine survives in the Bodleian Library. In it Fuller has pride of place, rope round his neck, kneeling at the feet of the holy king who had intervened when earthly justice failed.

You'll have your own views about Fuller's miracle, and we should certainly take with a pinch of salt the Tudor monarchy's promotion of Henry's cult, designed to discredit Richard III. Even sanctity has its political uses. But the cult of Holy King Harry was not the invention of Tudor spin-doctors. It arose spontaneously, an expression of the longing of ordinary people in a brutal age that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven, that cruelty and suffering might cease, and love and mercy prevail.

Any society which tries to live without that aspiration is doomed to die of its own cynicism. The people of Tudor England thought they recognised in the figure of a failed, meek and murdered king an icon of another failed and murdered Lord, before whom one day all earthly rulers must give an account of their doings, in another order of justice. And who are we to say they were mistaken?