

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

Sunday June 12th 2016

Women of Spirit: Elizabeth I

It is late in the evening. In a small room, hung with rare tapestry, perfumed against the stench of nearby humanity by flowers and herbs, fresh and dried, on a bed of exquisite comfort and beauty, lies a woman who cannot sleep. She has been released from the daily constriction of her bodice, but not from her cares. Her face burns from the maquillage she wears to preserve her famed beauty; her teeth ache from the endless sweetmeats which she cannot resist. But the ache, the burn which she feels in the depths of her soul – these far exceed such merely physical deterioration. It is the eve of the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity, not that her people may celebrate this any longer. But Elizabeth, the blessed virgin who *is* celebrated throughout the land, is troubled by the revealing of yet another plot to kill her. A coalition of zealous hate, the Scottish queen Mary their figurehead, has been foiled again by her wakeful intelligencers. But that coalition is a hydra whose heads may grow again. She struggles to hold fast to the finer feelings of her faith in the face of baser fears. She reaches for her prayer book.

A short row away down-river in another palace people sleep, or try to. Some are in elegant chambers, fitting for a royal residence. Others are in dank, dark cells. If they sleep, it is a merciful moment of release from agony: the agony of constant interrogation, or of time spent on the rack or hanging in manacles, suspended just off the ground. They perhaps fear resort to the rarest of the instruments of torture, the Scavenger's Daughter. She does not stretch you beyond endurance, but crushes you beyond imagining. These shivering men, Ballard and Babington their names, pray in deadly earnest. They pray for the courage to face what will come, a death before whose cruelties their recent discomforts pale.

Back in her bedroom, the queen leafs through the prayer book she once had made. It is a mere two inches by three, with 38 tiny vellum pages bound in shagreen with gold enamel clasps, each studded with a ruby. Miniatures by Nicholas Hilliard of herself and of her last suitor, the Duc d'Alencon, are bound into it. The calligraphy is her own, as are the prayers themselves. She reads from her own words:

'O Lord God... strengthen me with Thy grace that I may feed Thy people with a faithful and true heart, and rule them prudently with power. O Lord, Thou hast set me on high; my flesh is frail and weak. If I therefore at any time forget Thee, touch my heart, O Lord, that I may again remember thee... Grant me, O Lord, a listening ear to hear Thee and a hungry soul to long after Thy word...'

A few days later she instructs Lord Burghley, her principal minister and closest adviser, that the 'horrible treason' of the conspirators require executions of 'more terror' than normal. He knows her meaning. Instead of letting them asphyxiate on the gallows before their disembowelling and dismemberment, they should be cut down from the rope while still conscious, to feel the full horror of their punishment.

This is the woman, Elizabeth I, whose fabulous portraits are amongst the most magnetic and mesmerising we have of our monarchs. At the apogee of the Tudor dynasty, she exerts an extraordinary fascination, centuries later. She was clearly a woman of spirit in the wider sense. But what do we make of her in this series of sermons about women whose spiritual life has been so remarkable and influential? Or, to be more blunt, how do we reconcile the woman of prayer with the woman who could order the most excruciating form of execution? The gathered crowds, well used to such gory spectacles, even they bayed in disgust at the way the traitors were tormented.

It would be too easy simply to say either 'well, that's how they operated in those days'; or, conversely, 'she was a total hypocrite, no Christian would behave like that'. Or at least, to rest on one such snappy judgment would be simplistic.

Context *does* matter. What we now regard as unpardonable cruelty was, to varying degrees, common currency in the sixteenth century. And in the case of Elizabeth, we know that she did not resort so readily to summary, capital punishment as her predecessor Mary had. The first years of her reign were much less bloody. Added to this, she knew only too well how viciously people could act when fired up with religious zeal, Protestant or Reformed or Catholic. Indeed, even when she hardened her position in the middle of her reign, as the plots and threats became ever more persistent and murderous, she stuck to her belief that *treason* was the canker, not heresy. Even though she had learnt her faith at the knee of Katherine Parr, her last step-mother and a real enthusiast for reform, Elizabeth was no Genevan task-mistress. She shaped a settlement – Uniformity - which avoided extremes of religion, founded on an adamant doctrine of royal authority - Supremacy.

More than four centuries later, we in the west may well have come a long way. But we have no right to be complacent or sanctimonious. There is still the death penalty in the Land of the Free. We still make and sell arms across the world, sometimes to

regimes whose approach to politics and justice seems no better than that of the sixteenth century. The world is scarred by human violence still.

But, to shift the focus back to the spiritual, to the life of faith: we do well not to be complacent in our convictions here either. The capacity of Elizabeth both to pray earnestly and beautifully and to order foul punishment may horrify us now, but there are people of Christian conviction in the world whose views are closer to hers than ours. And in our private spheres, how beautifully do our desires and actions dovetail with our finer prayerful moments?

We have to be humble in the face of all this, and honest. We should not rush to judgment on the evils of past times, nor think that we are in some sunny upland of moral and spiritual enlightenment. This is because we are still on a journey, a pilgrim journey if we are people of faith.

This is envisaged in those readings we heard. When Paul says *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*, we see a powerful example of something he is repeatedly and paradoxically implying: 'this is how it is, now let it be so'. Because, brothers and sisters, and I hope this isn't a shock, we haven't really quite realized Paul's demand that we *let it be so*, have we, two thousand years on?

But then Jesus tells us, in his teaching on the mountain-top, this remarkable thing:

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

This is not rhetorical exaggeration, done for effect. I think the clue is in treating the word 'perfect' as a passive word: 'be perfected'. That means allowing the Holy Spirit to work on us and in us. As Jesus said to his friends at the Last Supper, 'he will guide you into all the truth'. This is an ongoing, dynamic process, and is certainly still going on. God became human that we might become divine. We must pursue it with vigour and courage and imagination, because we do not know when our time will run out. The end of all things may come like a thief in the night. But above all we must pursue it with joyful humility. Joy at what we are promised. Humility at our being so loved, that the promise is made at all.

In her own time, in her own way, failing and faltering just like us, I think Elizabeth may have known something of this too.