**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

6TH of JANUARY EPIPHANY

10TH of JANUARY WILLIAM LAUD

EPIPHANY

There is a baritone aria in Handel’s ‘Messiah’ – an arioso to be precise – that sets the prophetic utterance: ‘and the gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.’ And then we go into ‘The People that walked in darkness. … have seen a great light.’

It was in the ninth century that these three ‘wise men’ became kings and were assigned names and even races. That was a myth that felt significant to Christians at that time, but what might the legend that three magi visited the infant Christ mean for us today?

What Matthew, or his source is telling us through this story is that Jesus, or, rather, his family, finds time and space for all people of all races to come to him in humility, but perhaps we need to think a little more about people walking in darkness.

Muslims have the ‘Jahiliyyah’ – the time of ignorance before the arrival of the Prophet, but Christians had six and a half centuries of history and tradition that, from our point of view, has been re-packaged to form a back story for Islam, and perhaps Christians fail to realise that our early theologians have done something similar with precious Jewish traditions, which are not ours to mess with.

John Rogerson, the Bible scholar and Anglican priest, points out that we have a tendency to interpret in hindsight God’s actions in ways that suit our own point of view, which is to place limitations on our understanding of God’s freedom to act as God wills. The question is as to whether God permitted any community whatever to walk in total darkness, and if we look more carefully at the Epiphany story the answer should be clear.

Increasingly nowadays theologians and Bible scholars are beginning to emphasize the meaning of the miracle stories as not only signs indicating who Jesus was, but their significance in restoring marginalised and outcast groups into the fold, but are we thinking ‘the Jewish fold?’ To do so is to miss the significance of the three wise men, who come right at the moment of Jesus’ birth, with the shepherds; a segment of outcasts from society, reputed, among other things, to be thieves. With all the sentimentality that surrounds our Christmas, even among people who pride themselves on celebrating its ‘real meaning’ appear not quite to realise the broader significance of the incarnation.

Father James Alison, a Catholic priest who writes about the place of gay and lesbian people within the church, stresses that the whole purpose of Jesus’ life here on Earth was revolution. Thinking about the other end of the story – Easter, should confirm this. Whatever happened that we think of as ‘the resurrection’ serves to prove that God can and does erupt through all the malice, corruption and injustice that humanity can generate, and remain totally in charge, even if he chooses for whatever motives, not to exercise his prerogative of control.

According to tradition, gold for a king, frankincense for a God and myrrh for death, but in our time what is surely being indicated is that not only is Jesus and his church open to welcome strangers, but that the offerings from those strangers, made in humility, are acceptable and welcome within God’s church for their appropriate use. This, of course, in the first instance, comprises fresh insights from the Jewish tradition, which scholars have been exploring since the second world war, but it also surely includes the appropriate receipt and deployment of insights from other philosophical and faith traditions, and from the sciences, through which the spirit surely works for the good. Everything has value: ‘God didn’t create rubbish!’

When Jesus distributed his healings to the few gentiles we encounter in the Gospels, did he ever stop to hear them recite the ‘creed’ or did he rather honour what he perceived to be their spark of faith, however disordered it may have appeared to ’religious’ onlookers?

John has Jesus comforting his disciples, at ch14 v26 with the assurance that the spirit would teach them everything, and remind them of what he said; in other words, that the Spirit would assist in the interpretation of the principles he had set out, tailored to the needs and requirements of every succeeding generation: nobody, then, is ever going to know it all. The message of Epiphany is that we all need one another’s help in seeking God’s will, and that every gift and talent offered to that end in faith will be honoured by God and should equally be honoured by Christians.

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It is difficult, from the contemporary perspective of a congregation struggling to maintain its own traditions in the face of authorities that apparently stop at nothing to impose their own version of church on everyone else, to sympathise with the fate of an archbishop who apparently went to the block for having headed up just such a regime in the past.

WILLIAM LAUD [1573-1645] was born to a tailor in Reading; his gifts were spotted very early on and he went to St John’s College Oxford where he became Fellow in 1593 and ordained in 1601. In 1611 he was made President of St John’s, and 1616 Dean of Gloucester. On becoming Bishop of St David’s in 1621 he resigned his presidency of St John’s.

Laud seems to have been a protege of George Villiers, later Duke of Buckingham, the favourite and bedfellow of James I whom Charles took over as a close friend and Counsellor until Buckingham’s public assassination by a discontented soldier. This association, while helping Laud rise in the world, would not stand him in general favour later in life.

Shortly after Charles I succeeded to the throne, he created Laud Bishop of Bath & Wells, and in 1628 Bishop of London. In 1630, Laud was appointed Chancellor of Oxford University, where he saw through many necessary reforms and presented the Bodleian Library with some important manuscripts. In 1633 Charles translated Laud to Canterbury, where he attempted to impose uniformity of worship throughout the church and would only authorise ordinations if a clergyman had a parish living to go to, thus frustrating the scheme of puritans to appoint travelling lecturers who would visit towns and preach puritan doctrine publicly and often outside the purviews of the established church.

Very early in his ministry Laud had attracted opprobrium from puritans by moving the ‘Holy Table’ from the centre of the church, or wherever else it may have stood, to the east end, and railing it off, amid accusations of ’popery’ from the godly. In 1622 Laud had had a disputation with a Jesuit named Percy during which he had affirmed that the Roman and the English church were members of one and the same body of Christ, which also scandalised puritans.

In the event Laud became separated from his head not so much because of his role in the church, but because, having been enrolled by the king in the Star Chamber and High Commission, his hands became dirtied through his connivance with abuses and injustices perpetrated by Thomas Wentworth – ‘Black Tom Tyrant,’ in Ireland in the king’s name, that had nothing directly to do with Laud’s church policy, which, in a nutshell, was to impose uniformity of primarily sacramental worship on the whole Church of England, fearing that if church government were allowed to slip out of the royal prerogative law and order would disintegrate.

Had he stuck to his last Laud may well have been allowed to retire from public life unharmed in body, if not in mind and estate, as did William Juxon, his friend and fellow Oxonian, who succeeded him as Bishop of London, and though deprived of his bishopric during the civil war, Juxon was left unmolested throughout Cromwell’s ascendancy, and survived to become Archbishop of Canterbury at the restoration. Interestingly, though, Juxon had also been a member of Charles’ council during the 1630’s when he ruled without parliament, but his tolerance and generosity of spirit won him friends from all sides, and he was universally liked and trusted, whereas Laud’s personality and attitude was considerably less sympathetic.

Anglo-Catholics tend to claim Laud as one of theirs, but his position was not that of the Tractarians in the nineteenth century, several of whom did convert to Rome. He was what we would call a high churchman, and puritan opponents accused him of Arminianism, a position taken by the theologian Jacob Hermansz [Arminius in Latin,] who, still within the Dutch Reform Church, opposed Calvin’s teaching on predestination, asserting, from the bible, that God’s grace allowed for anybody’s salvation: Arminius got into difficulties even as professor at Leiden University, one of the foremost in Europe but he won out against the orthodox Calvinists, having actually departed little enough distance from them. The same dispute over predestination arose between John Wesley and George Whitefield but both were Methodists. The point, then, is not to equate Arminianism with anything vaguely to do with Rome, since Laud was always a staunch pillar of the English church.

It is difficult to understand the truly visceral hatred the puritans seem to have had for anybody whose beliefs differed in the smallest point with their own; something that came to a head during the commonwealth. If we recall battles between Catholics and protestants in parts of Britain, most people might think ‘dog whistle politics,’ and view the sad situation as one of culture clash more than actual religious difference. From the time of the Elizabethan settlement, however, through to the end of the seventeenth century, puritans viewed Roman Catholics as Anti-Christ and showed not the least restraint of the printed word in the excoriation of the established church with its government by bishops and archdeacons etc.

When we celebrate Guy Fawkes night, on the other hand, we tend to forget that had the gunpowder plot succeeded England would have lost its entire governing class, and would most likely have become what we now call a failed state, open to invasion and every other form of exploitation: it is easy to forget its true shock value to ordinary people, who, unlike us, might not think it such a bad idea nowadays!!!

There was, roughly speaking, a class division in English society that was represented in parliament: many professionals and lower gentry were puritans, whereas the upper crust threw their considerable weight and authority behind the established church, but puritans were no more than a very vociferous minority who were over-represented in the House of Commons. If public opinion had ever backed the puritan cause during the commonwealth, the restoration of king and church would hardly have come about with such ease and amid such public rejoicing.

Among the leading puritans in parliament was John Prynne, who wrote some truly scurrilous propaganda against the church, and was tried, fined, pilloried and publicly mutilated. Later in the 1630’s he and a man named John Bastwick were further mutilated and branded ‘SL’ for ‘seditious libel,’ but Prynne maintained that the letters stood for ‘Stigmata Laudis,’ thus gaining a propaganda victory.

The cases of Prynne and Bastwick attracted very great public sympathy, at a time when Charles’s policy of governing the country without consulting parliament was running into all kinds of difficulties, but it must be said that Laud never brought about an execution during his primacy, and this is not to damn him with faint praise, since the press was by no means free, and what was being printed would be likely to offend many people even today.

Having thrown the whole of the church’s authority behind Charles’s increasingly unpopular government, Laud and Wentworth became prime targets for hatred and revenge in parliament once the king was forced to call upon it for money and legislative imprimatur. In the event they insisted on the removal from office of both men, and Charles was unable to save Wentworth from attainder and subsequent execution, for which the king was unable ever to forgive himself, having promised Wentworth absolute protection in body and estate.

Laud spent many years in the tower before his turn came for attainder, and he was beheaded on 10th of January 1645. A record of his ‘sermon’ on the scaffold exists, and it is clear that he saw himself as a martyr, as do some contemporary historians. Others seem to have airbrushed him out of history altogether.

Nobody has ever argued that Laud wished to reimpose Roman Catholicism on the English church, though to the extent that he may have encouraged and assisted Charles in his futile effort to impose uniformity in Scotland he was thoroughly misguided. This said, it was perfectly defensible to have defined boundaries within which the puritans might be allowed to follow their consciences if the latter had themselves ever intended to exercise patience and tolerance on their side. The church probably required that a sensible and practical balance be re-negotiated between the use of altar and pulpit, but nobody was behaving sensibly.

Laud cannot be blamed for his unfortunate personality, and his association with the king was never likely to bring out the best in him, and to that extent he was unlucky. Whether he ranks as a saint is, ultimately, known by God alone.

Since the end of the 17th century congregations are supposed to have been protected from bishops imposing their own brand of religion on them against their will, but policies are only as effective as the goodwill of those entrusted to put them into effect.