

A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

Sunday, 2 November 2014

If you hang around near the iron gate from the Great Quad into Radcliffe Square, you may overhear the tour guides filling the ears of their customers with a quaint variety of misinformation about the College. Among their less idiotic ideas is the suggestion that it was founded as a war memorial to the English knights who died at Agincourt. A quick glance at our founding charter, with its references to Henry V, the Duke of Clarence and ‘the dukes, earls, barons, knights, esquires and other nobles and subjects’ who had died in the French Wars, seems to bear the idea out. No less a scholarly authority than the *Victoria County History* describes the College as a ‘Lancastrian war memorial’,¹ and our Victorian predecessors seem to have had a similar idea, if we are to judge from the way in which they reconstructed the reredos with the niches filled by statues of sundry English worthies. Several then fellows of the College are present, but most of the figures we see today represent Archbishop Chichele’s former colleagues from the court of Henry V. The sculptor may even have been following the list of early benefactors of the College which survives in the archives, starting with the Dukes of Bedford and Gloucester, continuing through the archbishop’s relations, friends, and helpers (including Lady Joan Croxford, *soror dicti Collegii*²), and adding an archer or two. More exactly, I think, we see Shakespeare, specifically Henry V’s speech before Agincourt, set in stone. ‘Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester’, there they stand; familiar in our

1 VCH Oxfordshire III,174.

2 VCH Oxfordshire III,175.

ears as household words, here they are equally familiar to our eyes.³

We need to be clear, however, that all this is completely anachronistic and remote from our founder's intentions. No doubt he could have founded a war memorial had he wished: he must have had a sufficient acquaintance with the classical world to have encountered the idea of commemorating those fallen in battle, and indeed a similar concept will be familiar to any reader of those parts of the Old Testament which reflect pre-exilic Jewish belief, before contact with the Hellenistic world had introduced the idea of an immortal soul.⁴ In the eyes of the Archbishop and his generation, however, all this must have seemed irrelevant if not objectionable. To understand his intentions it is necessary to invoke the Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints. I can be sure that you all believe in the Communion of Saints – or at least so many of you as recited the Apostle's Creed – but maybe it will not be entirely out of place if I remind you of what it means. From the early Fathers of the Church, up to the Reformation, almost all Christians believed with St. Augustine that 'there are some who have departed this life, not so bad as to be deemed unworthy of mercy, nor so good as to be entitled to immediate happiness.'⁵ These were the souls in purgatory, sustained in their sufferings during their time of purgation by the prayers of the faithful on earth. But this was only one side of the divine economy of prayer, for the Church Militant on earth was in its turn

3 *Henry V* Act IV, Scene iii.

4 Cf Ecclesiasticus Ch.44: 'Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us...'

5 *Civ. Dei* XXI,214.

supported by the prayers of the saints in heaven. It is they, the saints ranked in glory, who looked down from the reredos to remind the original fellows of their duty of prayer, and above them rose the Doom, the Last Judgement, to remind the fellows of the consequences of backsliding. The Communion of Saints was a process of solidarity, of reciprocal obligation and support of each other by the living and the dead – or rather, by those living in this life and those living in the next – all bound together in a great community of prayer. Perhaps there is no other aspect of medieval thought so sharply distinguished from our ruthlessly individualistic and atomised society.

In the fifteenth century this doctrine was universally understood, and invoked particularly often by founders of colleges and the like. Archbishop Chichele comes down to us, not so much as a saint or scholar, more as a practical, indeed hard-headed, lawyer who rose in the king's service through ability and hard work, in the process making the fortune which allowed him to endow the College, and making some enemies. I imagine he obliged the Fellows to pray for the souls of all the faithful departed, not simply because it was customary and he believed in it, but more specifically because, by participating in the cycle of prayer, they would invoke on the College the protection of the saints in heaven. A wealthy foundation could not fail, and did not fail, to attract covetous eyes. It would need powerful guardians, and the Fellows' prayers would help to ensure that they were present and watchful when their help was needed. The fact that we are here today is surely proof that our founder's wise provisions did protect the College from the several mortal perils which have beset it over the course of the centuries.

I hope we may continue to rely on the prayers of the saints, but you will have noticed that the Fellows are not conspicuously fulfilling their side of the bargain in the manner Chichele intended. These stalls are not filled morning and evening with Fellows, *mediocriter docti in cantu plano*, singing the praise of God and sustaining the souls in Purgatory. A cruel observer might even recall Edward Gibbon's comment on Dr Winchester, his tutor in Magdalen, who 'well remembered that he had a salary to receive, and only forgot that he had a duty to perform.'⁶ The comparison would be quite unfair, or at least *quite* unfair, but it remains the case that we were endowed with liberal maintenance by our founder, but we do very little to fulfil one of the conditions he imposed on his fellows. Perhaps I am not alone in feeling some discomfort at this discrepancy.

Of course there are good, or at any rate obvious, reasons, well known to you all, which explain why and how the case has altered since the fifteenth century. The Reformation ensured that those who were still ready to pray for the souls of the departed could not without perjury become fellows of this College for more than three hundred years. The Statute of Chantries, 1547,⁷ which abolished the majority of the schools, colleges, hospitals and alms-houses of England to the profit of the greedy men who controlled the boy king Edward VI, ought logically to have extinguished this College too, and made it officially impossible to endow any body to pray for the souls of the departed until it was repealed in 1960. These

6 Edward Gibbon, *Autobiography*, p.44.

7 1 Ed.VI c.14.

facts fully explain how we arrived at our present practices, but it is not so clear to me that they fully justify them. Praying for the souls of the departed is not now illegal, and we know without doubt that that is what our founder intended us to do. For most of us, I suppose, the requirement is in varying degrees inconvenient, distasteful, odious or ridiculous – but even in our age, is that sufficient to dissolve a moral obligation? Charity law provides for the diversion of endowments whose original purpose has become impossible or useless – but it does not place religious observance in either category. The College has assured the Charities Commission that it aims ‘to maintain the tradition of the College as a place of prayer’. Our present statutes, though a masterpiece of judicious ambiguity, certainly do not ignore religion. The preamble summarizes, and implicitly recommends, Chichele’s original instructions, prayers for the faithful departed prominent among them. The statutes require all fellows, indeed ‘all persons present in the College’, who are members of the Church of England to ‘accustom themselves to attend’ the Chapel services.⁸ They do not specify what is to be done there (presumably because members of the Church of England can be relied upon to know), but at the least they place no difficulty in the way of those minded to pray for the souls of all the faithful departed. I conclude that the formal obstacles to our fulfilling our founder’s known intention are not very substantial.

Yet I think we all recognize that the real obstacles lie elsewhere. This is not an age of universal faith (certainly not Christian faith), there are no religious tests for entry to

8 Statutes XXX,1.

the College or university, and I suppose that those of us who have an active faith and are at ease with the doctrine of the Communion of Saints are in a small minority. (Those sufficiently instructed to sing in plainchant will be even fewer.) To suggest that fellows ought to engage in some formal observance without believing in what they say, would be offensive to God and grossly contradictory to the principle of honesty in the pursuit of truth which should underlie all our work. An exercise in mass hypocrisy is certainly not the way to reconcile our founder's wishes with our own beliefs.

Must we conclude, then, that there is no way out of our moral difficulty? I would like to think that there is. I hope it is not commonly said that the College is a collection of comfortable thinkers who avoid uncomfortable questions, and I want to suggest that we ought to be able to do better than that. This moral difficulty which I spy is essentially a matter for the individual conscience, which each of us must address individually, and very likely answer differently. I do not think there is any promising way in which we could approach it collectively, as a college. As individuals, however, it seems to me that we are challenged on two levels. In the first place, as I have already suggested, there is a moral challenge, arising from the simple fact that we enjoy Archbishop Chichele's bounty without completely fulfilling his known intentions. The case of Mr Harding of Hiram's Hospital in Trollope's *The Warden* may come to mind, though it is not an exact parallel, and we are not yet under any public attack for neglect of this duty.

Beyond the moral challenge lies the intellectual challenge of faith. Those who have faith, especially Christian faith, will be equipped at least to understand why our

founder regarded prayer as important. Those who believe that they do not believe will find no easy way of entering into his intentions. This is not my difficulty, and perhaps it is impertinent of me to offer them any advice, but I would like to suggest, with becoming diffidence, that it might be fruitful here to apply the *ars nesciendi*, the ‘art of not knowing’, by which has traditionally been understood the habit of thinking which confronts and accepts the limits of what we know, and can know. These limits are not fixed. The discovery of quantum mechanics, to take an obvious example, has caused a massive shift in the boundaries between what is known, what is unknown, and what is unknowable. Much which seemed so certain in the age of high Positivism a century and more ago, has now been reclaimed by uncertainty. Faith by definition is a response to doubt: if there were no doubt, belief would be obligatory and faith would be neither necessary nor possible. Where doubt is inescapable, a rational faith is usually the best available response, and we are accustomed to apply it in all sorts of everyday, non-religious, situations – notably in the face of the commonplace unknown of the future. It is a big leap from there to praying for the souls of the dead, but it may be somewhere along these lines that we are most likely to find a resolution of our difficulty. Perhaps it would have been impossible to ask our Victorian predecessors to embrace uncertainty, but for us in our age it seems unavoidable – or avoidable only at the price of crippling restrictions on our intellectual field of view. My own conviction has long been that arrogance is the greatest enemy to learning. We become better equipped to pursue our various researches, the less we are convinced of our own infallibility, and the more we are at ease

with the limits of what we know, and can know. When we pass those limits, faith is left as the last response of reason to the unknowable. Somewhere out there, it may be, an honest acceptance of the weakness of our own understanding may carry us within reach of the age of faith expressed in our founder's dispositions.