

LINCOLN'S INN ADDRESS, 3 March 2024

'How are we going to handle this new king, Charles?'

This may well be a question that some in this Chapel, or the Society, have had to ask themselves in the past year. In my line of work, I am fortunately spared from having to think about it. But it is one that John Donne certainly had to confront when, almost 400 years ago, he was appointed to preach the very first sermon before Charles I, on 3 April 1625 – the fifth Sunday in Lent, or Passion Sunday. (Its 399th anniversary therefore falls in in two weeks' time from now!).

The coincidence of our own recent Caroline accession, and the discussion during it about the new monarch's likely approach to the job as well as about the arcane ritual of coronation, sent me back to Donne's sermon and made it seem an appropriate subject for today's address. (Although the king's recent diagnosis means that he will be in many people's thoughts in a different way, and our sympathies with him).

I have mentioned the coronation, but should emphasise that Donne's was not a coronation sermon: that event took place almost a year later, in February 1626, and the preacher was the rather obscure Bishop of Carlisle, Richard Senhouse. He was doubtless listened to attentively by the king, but others present at the coronation 'could hear little or nothing'. He would nonetheless have spoken for an hour, his time kept by an hourglass beside the pulpit – an instructive contrast with Justin Welby's offering last May, reassuringly described on the Archbishop of Canterbury's website as a '3 minute read'.

Donne, rather, was chosen to deliver the very first sermon that Charles would hear as king, a mere week after his father, James VI and I, had died on Sunday 27 March. The service was held at St James' Palace, the residence of the Prince of Wales, because by custom the dead monarch's household was only broken up after their interment. And it was a highly formal and ceremonial occasion, one necessarily characterised by an air of mourning rather than of celebration. A contemporary witness recorded that after leaving his chambers for the first time since his father's death, the king 'then dined abroad, in the privy-chamber, being in a plain black cloth cloak to the ancle; and so went after dinner into the chapel, Dr. Donne preaching, Lord Danvers carrying the sword before him, his majesty looking very pale, his visage being the true glass of his inward, as well his accoutrements of external mourning.' (Lord Danvers was the Penny Mordaunt of the day, then). Solemn, ceremonial, a highly charged moment – and one for which Donne had hardly

any time to prepare. The day before, he wrote with an audible air of panic to his patron, Sir Robert Ker, that ‘This morning I have received a signification from my Lord Chamberlaine, that his Majesty hath commanded to morrows sermon at S. James’. So he had a little over twenty-four hours to compose both his sermon and himself – it’s not surprising that he asked Ker if he could ready himself in the latter’s chamber at the palace, declined an invitation to eat, and declared that he would be leaving as soon as the service was over.

Donne was an interesting choice of preacher on Charles’ part, and by no means an obvious one. The solemn Lent Sunday sermon at court was always preached by a bishop, which Donne was not; indeed, the Lord Chamberlain’s list of preachers even shows that the slot had, prior to King James’s death, been allotted to Richard Neile, the Bishop of Durham: ‘Dean of Paules’ (that is, Donne) is added later in the margin. Donne was, though, one of the dead king’s chaplains-in-ordinary, a regular preacher at court, and a favoured one (James had overseen his ordination, as well as the rather irregular conferment of a Doctorship of Divinity by the University of Cambridge). He was also – without getting into the mind-boggling complexity of seventeenth-century doctrinal controversy – much less obviously attached to one of the parties in Church disputes than Bishop Neile. Donne signified continuity, but also change; and the king was signalling that he did not wish to be associated with any one faction.

All this placed a considerable burden on your former Preacher – and on top of it all, he was not even familiar with the chapel at St James’. So how did he meet the challenge, and what did he say to the new king, Charles?

His choice of scriptural text seems at first glance to emphasise the gloom of the situation, and to look backwards rather than with hope to the future. It is in fact part of our first Reading today, of Psalm 11; specifically Psalm 11, verse 3 – ‘If the Foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous doe?’ This is not a comforting question to address to a new king, nor one that expresses great confidence or optimism for his reign. And one might wonder why it should be asked. What was wrong with the foundations? Charles’ was not a contested or uncertain succession – unlike that of his father, who had only been nominated as her successor by Elizabeth I on her deathbed (if we believe the courtiers who announced that the crown would pass to the king of Scotland). Instead of a childless queen who refused even to discuss who would follow her, James had two sons, both brought up in his Scottish and then English courts; and although the elder died in adolescence, Charles had still had 13 years to become used to his

status as heir apparent. There had been concerns in the country about his religion – exacerbated by the madcap expedition he made to Spain in 1623 to win the hand of the Spanish Infanta, disguised as one ‘John Smith’ and accompanied by James’ favourite the Duke of Buckingham (a courtier whom James addressed as ‘Steenie’ because he rivalled St Stephen in beauty, and who addressed his king as ‘old dad’). But when that failed, and Charles turned in his dismay to favour war against the Spanish Catholics, such anxieties were allayed.

Still, all moments of succession are fraught, and were perceived as occasions of vulnerability for the country. And fear about the steadfastness of the monarch’s commitment to Protestantism did not disappear: James on his deathbed took pains that no rumours should be spread about him; and Charles, at the time of his accession, was betrothed to a French Catholic, Henrietta Maria (something that Donne seems to glance at in a daring aside in his sermon).

Donne, then, appears to be treading on rather thin ice. Facing the new king, about to establish his rule, the preacher implies that foundations **have** been destroyed and throws up his hands: ‘what can the righteous doe?’ But of course he knew exactly what he was doing. After acknowledging the loss of James in aptly preacherly terms, noting that ‘wee search no longer for Texts of Mortification; The Almighty hand of God hath shed and spred a Text of Mortification ouer all the land’, he turns the tables on his text and zooms in on that first word, ‘IF: **If** the Foundations be destroyed’. For what if they are not? We are much too prone, Donne argues, to believe that they have been – to see in every minor change, or in every loss, or in every dispute, a real and fundamental threat or disaster. But not everything is fundamental; not everything undermines or destroys foundations. We should, in the words of the Apostle Paul, ‘study to be quiet’ – that is, don’t be too ready to see fault where there is none; don’t be too suspicious of a superior’s actions, or motives; don’t sow deep division when you can continue to disagree civilly.

This is reassuring – stabilising, even – but there are, Donne acknowledges, occasions when the foundations **are** threatened: it would be as dangerous to ignore them as it is to find threats when they are not there. And here he puts some structure on that basic idea of ‘foundations’.

Foundations of what? Well, he observes, directly quoting from the German jurist Johan Kahl (some law at last – though civil rather than common, I’m afraid) – directly quoting Kahl, he says, ‘Fundamentum proprie de aedificiis dicitur’, ““foundation” is properly said of buildings’. These buildings are, in turn, the Church, the state, the family, and the self; and their foundations are Christ in the Scriptures, the law, peace, and the conscience. The first three of these buildings

and their foundations are threatened, it would come as no surprise to Donne's original audience to hear, by Roman Catholicism. Just to pick the example of the law, for obvious reasons – which Donne, quoting the *Digest* of Justinian, describes as 'the mutuall, the recipocall Suretie between the *State* and the *Subiect*' – here we find that it is not the occasional forbearing of a law on the part of the king or the courts that threatens the foundations of the state, but the assertion by the Pope that English Catholic subjects owe no allegiance to their monarch. So when these foundations are shaken, what can the righteous do? Again the lesson is, 'study to be quiet': in the Church, don't mistake matters indifferent for fundamental matters of faith; in the state, don't dispute laws once they are made; in the family, don't call every domestic fault a fatal one, and resolve disputes in the home; and in the conscience, do not distrust or suspect God.

Donne has thus shifted concern from what might **appear** to be a fundamental issue (the change in the person of the monarch) to what he contends are true fundamentals: the integrity of the Church and state, the security of the family, and the sureness of personal faith. By maintaining these through continuing in innocence, praying to God, suffering what ills might come, and rejoicing in blessings, the people will see their 'houses' stand firm, and be built up, he argues. In the final part of his sermon, Donne shows that from establishing the righteous with a good conscience, the foundation of the self, God will in turn build them up in the family, the state, and the Church. This neat chiasmus, reversing the order in which he had previously treated the four houses, reinforces the argument that Donne has made throughout the sermon, that each of the houses contains the others. He thus knits together the various houses he surveys into one, brilliantly performing what he is discussing: the establishment of a kingdom all of whose members are united and in which each part is the whole and vice versa. And along the way, he offers advice. On the law:

Dispute not *Laves*, but obey them when they are made; In those *Councells*, where *Laves* are made, or reformed, dispute; but there also, without particular interest, without priuate affection, without personall relations. Call not euery entrance of such a *Iudge*, as thou thinkest insufficient, a *corrupt* entrance; nor euery *Iudgement*, which hee enters, and thou vnderstandest not, or likest not, a *corrupt* Iudgement. As in *Naturall* things, it is a weakenesse to thinke, that euery thing that I knowe not how it is done, is done by *Witchcraft*, So is it also in *Ciuill* things, if I know not why it is done, to thinke it is done for *Money*. Let the *Lawe* bee sacred to thee, and the Dispensers of the *Law*, reuerend; Keepe the *Lawe*, and the *Lawe* shall keepe thee.

(I could say, ‘discuss’ – but this is an address, not a seminar).

Donne has performed a careful balancing act throughout his sermon, between mourning and celebration, and between anxiety and hope. As he approaches the end of his sermon, and the last grains of sand pass through the hourglass (he was fond of drawing attention to that object, showing off just how skilfully he kept to his allotted 60 minutes), the balancing becomes even more vertiginous, as he addresses both his congregation at large, and his royal master in particular, containing both within the second-person ‘thee’; and as he takes on the voice of his ultimate master, God:

First, gouerne this first *House*, *Thy selfe*, well; and as *Christ* sayde, hee shall say againe, *Thou hast bene faithfull in a little, take more*; Hee shall enlarge thee in the next House, *Thy Family*, and the next, *The State*, and the other, *The Church*, till hee say to thee, as hee did to *Ierusalem*, after all his other Blessings, *Et prosperata es in Regnum*, *Now I haue brought thee vp to a Kingdome*, A Kingdome, where not onely no *Foundations* can bee destroyed, but no stone shaken; and where the Righteous know alwayes what to doe, to glorifie *God*.

He is talking about God raising us to Heaven, of course – but he is also saying, to the King, in the words that the prophet Ezekiel heard the Lord address to Jerusalem, ‘I haue brought thee vp to a Kingdom’. ‘I’, John Donne, have brought you, Charles, to your kingdom today; ‘I’, the minister of God’s word, I as the Church, have brought you to that state, and not your Stuart blood or the laws of succession. And lest you think that is a stretch, let’s note that Donne has audaciously rewritten scripture: the Latin Vulgate text of Ezekiel 16: 13, which Donne quotes here, is ‘et profecisti in regnum’ (‘and you proceeded to the kingdom’); the King James Version has ‘thou didst prosper unto a kingdom’. Donne has introduced the first person ‘I’, and the agency of the speaker. And if that weren’t daring enough, at the end of such a loyal sermon, surely his hearers, immersed in the Bible from their youngest days, would have heard the unspoken next verses, with their warning of how Jerusalem fell from grace:

14 And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.

15 But thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown, and pouredst out thy fornications on every one that passed by; his it was.

The foundations of Charles' kingdom might be firm for now, and its comeliness intact; but he must remain steadfast in his faith and his government, or the consequences will be disastrous.

Donne's rewritten scriptural quotation has also brought two kingdoms – that on earth and that in heaven – together, and the foundations of both have been found to be secure, for now. The sermon concludes with a series of images of continuity in change which reimagine the loss of King James as something more like an extension of Stuart rule, since he is now with the Triumphant Church in heaven and his son with the Militant on earth – there is even a reference to the time of James' death, in the early afternoon. And it is with the final words of your former Preacher, on that challenging day in 1625, uttered shortly before he hurried into his coach and back to his house at St Paul's, that I will leave you today:

to this *Lambe of God*, who hath taken away the *sinnes* of the world, and but changed the *Sunnes* of the world, who hath complicated two wondrous workes in one, To make *our Sunne* to set at Noone, and to make *our Sunne* to rise at Noone too, That hath giuen him *Glorie*, and not taken away our *Peace*, That hath exalted him to Vpper-roomes, and not shaken any *Foundations* of ours, To this *Lambe of God*, the glorious *Sonne of God*, and the most Almighty *Father*, and the *Blessed Spirit* of Comfort, three Persons, and one *God*, bee ascribed by vs, and the whole *Church*, the *Triumphant Church*, where the *Father* of blessed *Memorie* raignes *with God*, and the *Militant Church*, where the *Sonne* of blessed *Assurance* raignes *for God*, All Power, Praise, Might, Maiestie, Glory, and Dominion, now, and for euer.

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