

BURGHLEY 500

Service of Thanksgiving, Westminster Abbey, 22 June 2022

ADDRESS

Your Royal Highness, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This is a time of anniversaries. A few weeks ago we celebrated the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and gave thanks for her longevity, her profound sense of duty and her ability to embody continuity across radical change. It is a measure of the man's greatness that, five hundred years after the death of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, principal minister of the first Queen Elizabeth, we gather now to give thanks for his life and legacy and to celebrate—and not co-incidentally—those same qualities of longevity, duty and continuity across change.

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It is especially appropriate that we should do so here in Westminster Abbey. The Abbey is the epitome of English history. Or in Lord Macaulay's wonderful phrase: "that temple of silence and reconciliation where the enmities of twenty generations are buried".

So, standing about us like witnesses, are the tombs, monuments and burial places of Cecil's contemporaries, the men and women who knew him as we never can: the colleagues he jostled with at court and council; the monarchs he served so well, Edward VI and Elizabeth I; the monarch he destroyed and pursued to the death, Mary, Queen of Scots and the monarch whose accession he and his son and successor Robert Cecil did so much to secure, James VI and I.

For the Abbey is also the royal church and Cecil was first and foremost a royal servant.

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But Cecil also—despite his Lincolnshire birth near Colly Weston, the almost-vanished palace of the Tudor matriarch, Lady Margaret Beaufort—became a Westminster man. He was High Steward of the Abbey. He lived nearby at Burghley House on the Strand and worked in the old royal Palace of Westminster and the new Palace of Whitehall. Above all,

he was instrumental in setting up, by an Act of Parliament of 1585, the city government of Westminster, which was run as a Cecil fiefdom.

The existence of the twin cities of London and Westminster—the one the financial and commercial capital and the other the royal and governmental—has likewise woven itself into our history and is nicely acknowledged by the presence here today of the Lord Mayor of Westminster.

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Above all, Westminster is an index of the scale and speed of change in Cecil's lifetime. In 1520, the year of Cecil's birth, this Benedictine Abbey, the largest in the kingdom, was enjoying a magnificent Indian summer under John Islip, its last great abbot-builder. Conversely, the royal palace of Westminster was a shadow of itself since the residential part had burned down in 1513, never to be rebuilt. Instead, the roost was ruled by the king's great minister, the Cardinal-Archbishop-Chancellor, Thomas Wolsey, from his splendid Westminster palace at York Place.

The following year, 1521, King Henry VIII, encouraged by Wolsey, wrote his book against Martin Luther and was rewarded by a grateful pope with the title *Fidei Defensor*: "Defender of the [Catholic] Faith". Anne Boleyn (then at finishing-school at the French court), the Divorce, the Reformation and Elizabeth herself were an unimagined and unimaginable future.

Yet, within a decade and a half, the unimaginable had happened and the young William Cecil was part of it.

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Aged only fifteen, Cecil went up to Cambridge's newest, most fashionable and brilliant College, St John's, itself sharply repurposed from what its founders, Lady Margaret Beaufort and Bishop John Fisher had envisaged. They had hoped to use the movement *ad fontes* ("back to the sources") and the new, Renaissance linguistic skills in the ancient tongues of Latin, Greek and Hebrew which enabled it, to purify and renew the Catholic faith.

Instead, the second generation of the College's leaders followed in the footsteps of Martin Luther (and now indeed of the turncoat Henry VIII) and used the new instruments,

and the fresh understanding of the New Testament in particular, to attack the Catholic church.

Under their influence, Cecil, himself a brilliant linguist, became and remained a convinced Protestant—though, as his behaviour during the Catholic restoration of Queen Mary shows, he was not (literally) prepared to go to the stake for his beliefs.

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But the new intellectual movement had its acute political dangers as well. It juxtaposed the rediscovered, sophisticated political theories of Greece and Rome against the sixteenth-century reality of personal monarchy and aristocratic values. From below, the contrast could provide a justification for rebellion and revolution; from above, it could encourage an absolutist contempt for representative institutions and customary legal systems as inefficient and—using that new, progressive term of insult invented by the great Erasmus himself—“medieval” survivals.

Cecil was in no danger of falling into either of these opposed errors. He had an innate sense of order, which was further developed by his rigorous education. The result showed in everything from his attitude to state and society to his magnificently organised libraries, archives, and maps.

Moreover the public institutions of mediaeval England—its Parliament, administration and system of Common Law—were themselves unusually sophisticated and developed. And Cecil was fully inculcated into them by the next stage of his education at Gray’s Inn.

The result was that Cecil saw the Roman world and his own as being complementary, not contradictory. His two favourite books were the Bible and Cicero’s *De Officiis* (“On Duties”). He saw both as guides to moral action: the former in religion, the latter in politics.

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Fortunately Elizabeth herself, thanks to her key tutors who were likewise members of Cecil’s Cambridge circle, had received much the same education as Cecil and imbibed much the same values.

Which she showed in her brief speech to Cecil at the first formal meeting of her Privy Council:

I give you this charge, that you shall be of my Privy Council, and content yourself to take pains for me and my realm. This judgment I have of you, that you will not be corrupted with any manner of gift, and that you will be favourable to the state, and that without respect of my private will, you will give me the counsel that you think best.

Here in Elizabeth's own words there is that same mixing of the Latinate and the English: the "state" is a new-fangled Renaissance concept; the distinction between Elizabeth the woman's "private will"—what she wants to do—and the Queen's properly counselled or advised public will—what she ought to do—is the old, medieval English way of tackling the same question.

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Cecil was a great builder too and his buildings, like his life, combine the mediaeval and the Renaissance. Thus the Gothic spire of Burghley House signals that its owner was a great landed nobleman; its clustering classical columns that he was an educated Renaissance gentleman with a Roman-style commitment to public service.

This double architectural vocabulary remains profoundly influential in England and in Westminster in particular. It is why Parliament and the law courts, since they are mediaeval in origins, are built in the Gothic style; while the bureaucratic palaces of Whitehall which, theoretically at any rate, embody the values of enlightened public service, are constructed in the Classical.

The double style reaches its apotheosis in Wren's churches, housing as they do a faith that claims to be both old and new, Catholic and reformed.

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But here the work of compromise was Elizabeth's, not Cecil's. Cecil had no interest in music and the magnificent music we are hearing in this service is the work of the largely Catholic composers of Elizabeth's Chapel Royal. And it was Elizabeth who, in the face of Cecil's bitter opposition, retained traces of Catholic ritual and vestments.

In short, the carefully judged make-up on the Plain Jane of Protestantism (in the piquant language of George Herbert's poem which we'll hear shortly) was the Queen's, not her minister's.

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But it was a rare lapse. Otherwise the lesson of Cecil's life was that the new is compatible with the old, which it refreshes but does not replace.

It's a lesson that now, more than ever, our great national institutions—Cecil's institutions—of Parliament, the law, the universities, the civil service and the Church—need to re-learn before change, shallow, ill-thought through change, ruptures their continuity for ever and undoes the work of Cecil and 500 years.

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