

Sermon, Stamford 12/9/21 (William Cecil)

‘Fear God. Honour the King’ – so it says at the very end of our second reading. Now *there* is a balancing act, a tightrope to walk. No-one can serve two masters, we read earlier in the New Testament: if you try, you will inevitably end up selling one of them short. And this is the dilemma, often the tragedy, of the Christian statesman, the Christian in politics who at least sets out honestly attempting to serve their God and their king or queen, their state or their president. Sometimes, possibly even often, the interests of the two line up or at least don’t openly clash. But sooner or later, usually sooner, fearing God while also honouring the king comes to seem almost impossible.

Our history is littered with, and occasionally graced with, statesmen who have found this balancing act impossible. I will not recite the dismal litany of politicians and noblemen, in every era including our own, who have professed Christianity but who have quietly abandoned or massaged their Christian convictions when they became politically or personally inconvenient. There is also the rarer phenomenon of the opposite, the statesman who finds in the end that his conscience cannot be made to comply with the necessities of politics. Christians normally remember such people as heroes and sometimes as martyrs. The sixteenth century, William Cecil’s century, had its share of such heroes. Two of them have been remembered particularly vividly. Thomas More was Lord Chancellor under King Henry VIII but in the end resigned because he was unwilling to take part in what he saw, not merely as a schism, but as tearing the Church, the Body of Christ, limb from limb. He stuck to that conviction to the point that it cost him his head. He became treasured as a martyr and ultimately canonised as a saint by the church he refused to abandon, and, more surprisingly, was turned into a secular hero of conscience in Robert Bolt’s play and film *A Man for All Seasons*. More’s opposite number, a man who does not come out of Bolt’s play very well, was Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the author of the very liturgy we are sharing this afternoon; who was also elevated to the highest office under Henry VIII, who remained at that dangerous pinnacle for two decades, but who, for all his loyalty to the crown, found in the 1550s that his new queen’s order to conform to the Roman Church was one his conscience revolted at, and he was burned at the stake. That is what happens to heroes: and for Christians, followers as we are of a Saviour who also laid down his life unswervingly when the tyrants of his own day demanded it of him, that example ought to be good enough.

And yet ... most of us are not the stuff of which martyrs are made, and mercifully, most of us are not faced with such terrible choices. Nor should we valorise those heroes too blithely: both Thomas More and Thomas Cranmer were willing to kill for their faith as well as to die for it – both of them took part in condemning and executing men and women whose religious views they saw as an offence to God and a threat to the safety of the realm. So too did the man we are here to commemorate today, William Cecil, the first Lord Burghley, who in his long decades at the heart of Queen Elizabeth I’s government got plenty of blood on his hands, not least that of the queen’s cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, whose execution he had been pressing for for years. Thomas More and Thomas Cranmer have both been called saints; that is not, I think, a word we would apply to William Cecil. And yet, in his way, he has more to teach us than the heroes do, by the example he shows of how to lead a Christian life in politics, in this tangled and compromised world, without ever becoming fatally tangled or compromised himself.

I don’t need to rehearse Cecil’s life to this congregation. But, in very brief, he was born in 1520 or 1521 to a minor but upwardly family of gentry, made the most of his Cambridge education, and found his way into royal service, first as a soldier – he was close to

serious injury at the battle of Pinkie in Scotland in 1547 – and then as an administrator, one of those rare and invaluable people who has the knack for getting things done. Tudor England's government, whose bureaucracy was, let's say, underdeveloped, absolutely depended on there being a few people like that around, and the men in power under the boy king Edward VI rapidly found this young man from Lincolnshire was invaluable. Not only the men. In 1550 he added another title to the sheaf of minor offices he was amassing, that of surveyor to the Princess Elizabeth. Elizabeth had inherited her father Henry VIII's nose for talented administrators but not his tendency to cut their heads off when he lost his temper. She quickly spotted that Cecil was a man she could work with.

Then in 1553 King Edward died, and after a failed attempt to fix the succession – a project which Cecil was careful not to be too closely involved in – the English throne passed to the Roman Catholic queen Mary I, and Protestants like William Cecil and the Princess Elizabeth were faced with a choice. The saints and the heroes went into exile, or in some 300 cases went to the fire, rather than compromise their faith. The timeservers and the hypocrites simply conformed to what the new government told them to do, the way they had conformed to the last one. But Elizabeth and Cecil found a middle way. They did not defy the new regime. They remained in England, they both let it be known they were attending Mass. But they also made their sympathies discreetly clear. Elizabeth herself came close to being executed as a traitor in 1554, though it turned out her sister was as squeamish about shedding royal blood as she herself was. As to Cecil, he resigned his offices – he would not serve under a Catholic queen – but he did not disappear. He was elected to the House of Commons in 1553 and 1555; while he worked constructively with the regime, and was clear he was a loyal subject, he also helped to ensure that Parliament blocked the queen's plans to seize the property of Protestants who had gone into exile. And above all, he kept in increasingly close touch with Princess Elizabeth. On the very day she became queen, 17 November 1558, she appointed Cecil her secretary of state. He remained the queen's closest, most trusted and most powerful minister for the remainder of his life, until his death in 1598. The queen only outlived him for five years, during which time the leading figure in her government was Robert Cecil, William's son. What we call Elizabethan England was, in truth, also Cecil's England. The *regnum Anglorum* was at the time sometimes called the *regnum Cecilianum*.

But Cecil was not simply a loyal servant to his queen – though he was always that. Or rather, he understood loyalty, the Biblical command to honour the king or queen, as meaning more than simply obeying. Because the remarkable fact about Cecil's career, about his four decades at the heart of Elizabeth's government, was that while he and the queen profoundly trusted one another, they also profoundly disagreed with each other. Both of them were Protestants, but she was a very cautious kind of Protestant, averse to any kind of rash or international ventures, always keen to keep her options and her channels of communication open. Her own personal religious and aesthetic tastes cut across the new orthodoxies – she like dignified liturgy, polyphonic music of the kind we have heard today, and even, shockingly, having a crucifix in her private chapel. Perhaps that sort of religion is more congenial to some of us than Cecil's. Cecil, much more than Elizabeth, was convinced that the religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant was the defining issue of the age: and he was in no doubt on which side England did and must stand. The old world, Elizabeth's world, in which international politics was about dynasties and the great families of Europe, was in Cecil's view simply out of date: now, it was about Christ versus Antichrist. Religious wars were breaking out all over Europe, in Scotland, in France, in the Netherlands. A Catholic Scotswoman stood poised to seize the English throne in the name of Rome. Cecil was determined that England would play its part in fending off these, as he saw them, terrible evils. And his queen did not agree with him.

How is such a man supposed to cleave to his two loyalties, to serve his two masters? How can he both fear God and honour the queen? A lesser man would have swallowed his religious principles and done what he was told; a different man, in some ways also a lesser one, would have walked away from politics and kept his conscience in impotent and irresponsible purity. And to be clear, had he been serving a lesser monarch – such as that monstrous narcissist Henry VIII – those would have been his only choices. But neither his loyalty to his queen, nor hers to him, was so fragile as to be shaken by the mere fact that they disagreed on the most profound issue of the day. Instead, between them, they found a way of using this disagreement to make the kingdom all the stronger while staying as true as they could to both of their consciences. Cecil's principal titles were Secretary of State and later Lord Treasurer, but he might better have been styled, in a later century's phrase, Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Or indeed, sometimes, it seemed that the queen herself was leader of the opposition to her own government, with most of the council agreeing with Cecil and she herself blocking them and countering them with all her considerable political wiles. The trust was profound enough for them to hammer the matter out. And call it wisdom, call it Providence, call it sheer luck, the mystery of Elizabeth's government was how often it all played out for what both the queen and her minister saw as the best.

One example to stand for many. Six months into Elizabeth's reign, when the new regime still looked and felt very fragile, a genuine crisis erupted on her northern border. Scotland, which had been England's enemy and France's ally for centuries, and had in recent years become almost a French colony, was suddenly engulfed in a civil war between a pro-French, Catholic party and a pro-English, Protestant party. For Cecil, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform England's security and advance the Protestant cause: he wanted to intervene right away on the side of the Protestant rebels. The main obstacle was his queen, who didn't want to spend money, didn't want to take risks, didn't want to support rebels and didn't like the radical talk of the Scottish Protestants. But she could also see Cecil's point. Painfully slowly, over the course of the summer and autumn, he pushed her towards intervening. At one point he persuaded her to send some money north to support the rebels, and it was stolen en route: Cecil took over a week after receiving this news before he worked up the courage to tell her. But at last, the logic of the situation reluctantly convinced her and she authorised, first a naval blockade, then a full-scale military intervention in the spring of 1560. So one way of reading this story is to say Cecil won; he boxed his queen into doing what he thought was right. But another is to say that the months of delay made a huge difference. The English had often tried to intervene opportunistically in Scotland before, and had usually only succeeded in uniting the Scots against them. Elizabeth was so obviously reluctant to act, and so clearly determined to withdraw her forces at the earliest possible moment, that her Scots allies believed that this intervention was not a smokescreen for yet another attempt at a conquest. And so the alliance held and the intervention succeeded; Cecil himself went to Edinburgh to negotiate the treaty when the French army surrendered; and the foundations were laid for the alliance between England and Scotland, now two Protestant countries, an alliance which has persisted in one form or another ever since and which is still, just about, holding on.

It became Cecil and Elizabeth's two-step: he pressing for action, seeing the world as a conflict with the forces of Antichrist, she reluctantly holding back, trying to keep her options open and to find other ways forward. It usually ended with her doing what he insisted had to be done – whether taking up arms to defend the beleaguered Dutch or, indeed, executing the queen of Scots – but she did it on her timescale and in her way. And sometimes Cecil did not get his way: twenty and more years of urgently pressing the queen to marry, which seemed to him such an urgent necessity, in the end could not budge her.

And what was the result? If Cecil lamented that some potential opportunities were missed, some risks were avoided too. Elizabethan England managed to turn itself from a second-rank, near-bankrupt country riven by religious divisions into the great hope of the Protestant cause, a refuge for the desperate, the country which saw off the might of Spain and began to reach out to the newly-discovered globe, and which, incidentally, also built a structure to care for the poor that would last until nineteenth-century liberals scrapped it for being too generous. And England did all this on a financial shoestring and while facing a string of deadly serious plots and conspiracies.

The memory of Gloriana, of the Elizabethan golden age, can be overblown: at the time the reign felt like a white-knuckle ride of desperate dangers barely averted, and Elizabeth and Cecil were as ruthless as any of the Tudors when dealing with those they deemed a threat; in my part of the world, the North-East of England, we don't forget the hundreds who were killed in acts of exemplary terror after the failed rebellion of 1569. The image of the golden age partly reflects the success of the regime's own propaganda, and partly rose-tinted hindsight. But then, the desperate dangers *were* averted. In real life, golden ages are few and far between, and even a passable imitation of one isn't to be sniffed at.

What lay at the root of that national success? Luck, or providence; also the character of the queen, whose heart and stomach would have been the envy of most kings; as she said, if she had been turned out of the realm in her petticoat, she would likely have found her feet and prospered anywhere in Christendom. But – and perhaps this is to say the same thing – it is also that decades-long working relationship with a chief minister who so often disagreed with her. In our own age where disagreements seem so unbridgeable, it is an example worth pondering. For their long two-step was not a struggle, but a dance. Queen and minister both knew their own minds, and fought their corners, sometimes hard; but they also both knew and trusted the other. They trusted each other's goodwill; they were willing to persuade and to be persuaded, to listen and to be patient. The Christian virtues at play in their working relationship were unfashionable then and are unfashionable now, and may seem unlikely virtues for a queen and a chief minister: self-control, patience and above all humility. Cecil's humility was of a particular kind, mind you, the humility of a lord, dynast, and masterly and sometimes ruthless politician. But for all that he firmly knew his own mind, he also knew that he was often wrong, that there is rarely only ever one answer to a question, and that others, not least his sovereign lady, had wisdom he did not. And he knew that a council chamber riven by disagreements can, if that trust and humility and loyalty underpins them all, produce wiser and truer decisions than any of them might on their own. Like an advocate in court who fights his corner fiercely but also ultimately not only abides by but also trusts the decision of the judge, he showed there is often greater wisdom in trusting one another than in trusting ourselves. Nearly seventy years into our country's second Elizabethan age, it is a lesson and example that has lost none of its relevance: the man who found a way both to fear his God and to honour his queen.