**United Guilds Service: St Paul’s Cathedral 31st March 2017**

It is, one must admit, easy to make fun of the Established Church. Even its Bishops have been known to indulge the practice.

In the Age of Enlightenment Voltaire wrote

With regard to morals, the Anglican clergy are better ordered than those of France, and this is the reason: all clergymen are brought up in Oxford University, or in Cambridge far from the corruption of the Capital. They are not called to high station in the Church until very late, and at an age when men have no other passion but avarice…

You will have noticed that we are trying hard in the Church to rewrite this narrative but sometimes perceptions continue beyond current realities!

The epitome of the Established Victorian Bishop is of course the unfortunate Dr Proudie, Bishop of Barchester, of which Trolloppe writes:

He was not the man to allow anything to be omitted that might be becoming to his new dignity…He was a man born to move in high circles; at least so he thought himself…He had been preacher to the Royal Beefeaters, curator of theological manuscripts in the Ecclesiastical Courts, chaplain to the Queen's Yeomanry Guard, and Almoner to [a Senior Member of the Royal Family].

There is only a passing resemblance here to the job description for the Bishop of London!

For a portrait of the real old-fashioned Established Churchman, however, we must turn to Dean Greystock of Bobsborough in the *Eustace Diamonds*, in all his self-contradictory certainty:

It was bad to interfere with Charles, bad to endure Cromwell, bad to banish James, bad to put up with William. The House of Hanover was bad. All interference with prerogative has been bad. The Reform bill was very bad. Encroachment on the estates of the bishops was bad. Emancipation of Roman Catholics was the worst of all. Abolition of corn-laws, church-rates, and oaths and tests were all bad. The meddling with the Universities has been grievous… Education bills and Irish land bills were all bad. Every step taken has been bad. And yet to [him] old England is of all countries in the world the best to live in, and is not at all the less comfortable because of the changes that have been made….

I think we all know which way Dean Greystock would have voted in the recent Referendum!

Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang who went on to crown and anoint King George VI, on seeing his portrait, painted by Sir William Orpen in 1924 to hang in Bishopthorpe, is said to have complained to Hensley Henson, Bishop of Durham, ‘my portrait makes me look proud, pompous and prelatical’. Henson is said to have asked ‘to which of those epithets does your Grace take exception?’ – though it has also been said that any of those adjectives might equally have been used to describe Henson himself and indeed when he was not chosen as Archbishop of York, on Lang’s translation to Canterbury, he wrote to his chaplain ‘Though my vanity would have enjoyed refusing a Primacy, my judgment was clear against accepting one even if offered.’ He wasn’t!

It is, as I say, easy to make fun of the Established Church. It is perhaps part of our distinctive ministry to provide a universal object of humour for a nation that from time to time has had little else to laugh about, except possibly what some might see as almost Ruritanian rituals which continue to flourish in other historic institutions and places.

And so to the City of London and the United Guilds Service!

Fear not, I do not intend to mock the splendid traditions of our Livery Companies, our great City, or its Mayoralty. As a former Minor Canon of this Cathedral who has had the joyful privilege to serve as Chaplain to the Worshipful Company of Needlemakers for quarter of a Century, I have no desire to strain the pillars of the temple to breaking point!

There is something in all this ceremony and tradition to which we do well to attend. It has to do with how we hand that on, how it survives from generation to generation.

Earlier in this month I had the good fortune to preach two other sermons with a strong City connection, the Spital Sermon, at St Lawrence Jewry, and the Bridewell Sermon, at my own Cathedral in Southwark. Engaging with two City institutions of great antiquity, and now seeing so many other ancient companies assembled here, is powerful testimony that for a thousand years this has been a place where work is done, where the fruits of that work are gathered, and where some of those fruits are tithed for the good of those better able to prosper with the encouragement and support of power houses of charitable endeavour and philanthropy.

What is particularly remarkable about this is not that it happens, but that it goes on happening. St Paul commands us in the Letter to the Philippians: ‘Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen’. This is not easy. To be benevolent in one’s own lifetime is a good thing. But individual benevolence is not enough, for it fades and dies with the individual. If we are truly to ‘keep on doing the things [we] have heard and seen’ we need to ensure that our institutions hand this on from generation to generation. We need communities bigger than the sum of their parts, that build virtuous circles of connection, that generate wealth and learning and well being, year after year and generation after generation.

Our Gospel Reading identifies the true neighbour as the one who shows mercy. The Good Samaritan, seeking out and meeting specific needs in practical ways: a donkey for transport, oil wine and bandages for healing, money for bed and food, taking the time and energy and love to give these things without counting the cost.

Talk about the Big Society already seems like yesterday’s passing slogan. I do not wish to disparage the Big Society as a concept; but I do want to say that though we seldom hear the phrase now, we see it, as we have seen it these last thousand years, in the institutions of this great City.

Those of us who claim to be custodians of ancient values and capacities need to be energetic in living up to this ethic. After the turbulence of 2008 and with shadows of uncertainty cast by our changing relationship with Europe now we need more than ever to pass on what we have learned and received and heard and seen. I sense that the doctrine of Public Benefit will be an even more important determining factor politically over the coming decades in generating respect across the nation for our City institutions, so many of which can hold their heads high in modelling exemplary practice on this front.

The Livery Companies, like the Church of England, have the privilege of being to some degree public property, so that they can step into the public square, invite others in and offer challenge, leadership and compassion. Let us then reclaim the narrative of public service as something for all, resisting the temptation to shuffle responsibility onto those employed by the State to discharge it on our behalf. The Good Samaritan was not employed to do good, but acted out of love, drawing on the resources with which Providence had blessed him. This example of self-giving service is commended to us by Jesus Christ, and has been handed on faithfully by women and men, all playing their parts in institutions that over the centuries have done much good. Let us too pass on that which we in turn have received. Then we may have a good hope that truly the God of peace will be with us.

A final word. Last week gave us a shocking reminder of the need to be vigilant in defence of our freedoms as we witnessed an attacker striking at the heart of our parliamentary democracy and making victims of Londoners and visitors from all over the world. If we needed reminding of the increasingly global nature of life on these streets, those maimed and killed included twelve Britons, of which three were police officers, as well as three French children, two Romanians, four South Koreans, one German, one Pole, one Irish, one Chinese, one Italian, one American and two Greeks.

At the precise time of the incident I was on my way to meet with Tobias Ellwood, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister who went to the aid of PC Keith Palmer as he lay dying from multiple stab wounds. On discovering that Westminster had been sealed off, I went to my Cathedral Church in Southwark and took part in prayers for the victims, their families, our police, doctors, nurses and emergency services. The attack in Westminster was a brutal reminder of ongoing threats to the peace, security and wellbeing of the realm; but let us not forget, however, the many small acts of goodness, gentleness and kindness called forth that day in response to this one terrible act. The prompt action of a Government Minister was typical of the courage and dedication of many including passers by who showed care and compassion and mercy to their injured neighbours and gave us all hope that light continued to shine in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it: nor will it. Amen.