



14 October 2012
The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Judges 5 vv. 1–11
Romans 13 vv. 1–10

Inspirational Leaders



Queen Elizabeth I: Power and peace, pragmatism and piety

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Preaching on Ash Wednesday, the long serving Dean of St Paul's of the Elizabethan Age, Dr Alexander Nowell, found himself suddenly and forcibly interrupted by a woman screaming at him:

'Leave that alone! To your text, Mr Dean! To your text! Leave that; we have heard enough of that! To your subject!'

The heckler was Elizabeth I, her reason for interrupting, that the Dean, a man of puritan convictions had started to attack the use of crucifixes in religious practice. The Dean, like any sensible and loyal subject obeyed and returned to the scriptures.

But Dean Nowell clearly struggled to understand his monarch, for a little later in her reign, she castigated him again, this time for a gift of a prayer book from him which, with its pictures of saint and angels, the Queen decided was quite un-Protestant and smacked of the Church of Rome. The poor Dean just couldn't get it right. Perhaps, doubtless like many men, he put such apparent inconsistency down to 'the weakness of her sex'.

Without a doubt, Elizabeth I had a temper; without a doubt she was in some ways a vain woman; without a doubt there were moments of genuine indecision, even vacillation; but we should not be fooled by superficial or stereotypical male judgements, for also, without a doubt, she was a highly intelligent woman, an excellent orator, a subtle and very clever politician and a masterful manager of men.

I have chosen to speak about Elizabeth, as an inspirational leader within the context of religious worship, for two related reasons:

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The first is to redress a balance: Those who exercise power, especially under challenging circumstances (and the kingdom Elizabeth inherited in 1558 was beset with an extraordinary number of challenges for a 25 year old single woman) cannot avoid certain compromises or actions which would naturally perturb the Christian soul: the exercise of such power is simply not the context in which pure saintly souls are crafted. It is easy then for such people to be overlooked as impious or not very Christian. Whereas, I believe, Elizabeth the First can, and should, be seen as an example of an outstanding Christian leader.

On the face of it, that last statement may seem rather extraordinary, for the Dean of St Paul's was not alone in being confused by Elizabeth's Religion. Historians and biographers, as well as contemporaries, have all struggled to understand or read Elizabeth's religious convictions. All sorts of labels and accusations and speculations have been offered: She has been accused of atheism, largely by Catholics; of a calculating and expedient faith: going to Mass when her Catholic sister was on the throne before coming out as a Protestant when in power. The 'hot Protestants' had a term for this, a Nicodemite, after the Jewish leader Nicodemus who visited Jesus by night, that is, when it was safe to do so. And for the more conspiratorially-minded, Elizabeth 'might have been' part of a curious sect known at as the Family of Love or Familists.

The reality, I would suggest, is that Elizabeth was an independent-minded, Bible reading, prayerful, Protestant Christian with certain likes and dislikes that didn't quite fit the mould of much of her Protestant contemporaries – she was a great fan of Church music and ritual, and supported prominent Catholic composers; she preferred her clergy celibate; and, was not a fan of preaching, indeed she only tolerated sermons during Lent, so annoying her on Ash Wednesday was not the Dean of St Paul's smartest move. But Elizabeth was a deeply prayerful person and displayed considerably more charity and compassion than any of the other Tudor monarchs. She was, for example, quite evidently distressed and genuinely experienced agonies of the mind over the executions of her cousin Mary Queen of Scots and of the Duke of Norfolk - despite the political inevitability of their deaths.

The second, is that as a consequence, Elizabeth charted a genuinely 'middle way'. She created a Settlement, a compromise and as such she should be remembered, and indeed celebrated, as the founding spirit of what became Anglicanism; that is of a practical religious sensibility that re-worked the relationship between religion and politics in the light of the Reformation and the maelstrom of Tudor England, and sought the flourishing of all people under God - where love of neighbour was a goal to be achieved by a more effective and generous balance between order and freedom.

But in elaborating on this theme a little further, perhaps I should heed the advice of the Royal heckler and turn to the texts I have chosen for this evening:

The first from Judges provides a clear biblical example of the political leadership of a woman, Deborah, the prophetess and judge over all Israel whose actions lead, according to the book of Judges, to military success, stability and good order - 'and the land had rest forty years' - as the concluding words of Judges chapter 5, put it. Hindsight is a dangerously distorting lens, we know Elizabeth the First as the Virgin Queen, Gloriana, Good Queen Bess who presided over a Golden Age that has profoundly shaped the English imagination and our history. Yet Good Queen Bess came to the throne with words like heretic,



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bastard and whore echoing in the backstreets; she had the misfortune to follow the first undisputed Queen of England, her sister Mary, who despite the best intentions of the most generous of historians was quite frankly a disastrous ruler who did much to earn her nickname. She came to the throne in the year that the widely read Protestant theologian, John Knox produced his biblical denouncement of women leaders, as a thing ‘repugnant to nature’, ‘the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice’, in which ‘the foolish, mad and frenetic shall govern the discreet and give counsel to such as be sober of mind’. And, in case you have lingering doubts, ‘such be all women compared unto man in bearing of authority.’

‘Well, not all women, according to the Bible, Mr Knox’, for Deborah stands as a key biblical precedent, and indeed, Elizabeth I was seen as a godly Protestant Deborah exercising wisdom and judgement, maintaining good order and advancing equity and justice. And despite her well known rhetorical flourish - ‘I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have heart and stomach of a king, and of a King of England’ - she exercised her authority as a woman with all the advantages and disadvantages that brought.

Her childhood and adolescence should have left psychological wounds that would have sunk most people: After all, she began life, being female, as a bitter disappointment to her father. At the age of 4 years her mother, Ann Boleyn was executed by her father on what were almost certainly trumped-up charges; yet she seems to have gone on to form a good relationship with her father and indeed is never known to have spoken of her mother, whose dangerous memory her presence must have conjured in the minds of others on a daily basis.

She also had what has been described as a ‘brutal introduction to adulthood’ as a 14 year old girl at the hands of her new stepfather, who with his wife, Henry’s surviving widow, Katherine Parr clearly engaged in ‘appropriate behaviour’ with the future Queen. Yet, she managed to successfully negotiate the heady and complex mix of the personal and the political that made up Tudor court life awash with suitors and under intense pressure to make a good political marriage. She was clearly attracted to some of the powerful men of her day, and had a range of nicknames for her leading courtiers including ‘lips’ and ‘eyes’ yet she remained, to an extraordinary degree - in control.

Like Deborah, she had her Barak in the form of William Cecil (Sissle), Lord Burghley. Cecil was a Johnian and indeed (in passing) Elizabeth was also educated and tutored by Johnian scholars and educationalists. Cecil was without doubt one of the most outstanding politicians of the last 500 years and her chief minister for forty years. Elizabeth instructed this man at the outset of her reign as follows: ‘without respect of my private will, you will give me that counsel that you think best’; that is ‘you will tell it to be straight, whatever you know of my views, or indeed of the consequences’, he did, she didn’t always like it, but despite his extraordinary loyalty, intellect and political muscle she was also canny and strong enough to keep him in his place by encouraging other younger political figures. As her rebuke to another put it: ‘I will have here but one mistress and no master.’



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Elizabeth (like many monarchs) would of course warmed to our New Testament text from Romans, with its central themes of the role of the political leader as an instrument of God; of the requirement upon the good Christian to be loyal and obedient; and of the stress upon a practical Christianity focused on behaviour and oriented to promoting the good order of society. She was after all the consummate survivor, very well aware of the precarious nature of Tudor politics – her godfather, Thomas Cranmer had been burnt at the stake and indeed in her sister's reign she had had her spell in the Tower of London, in the same room from which her mother had departed to her death while other argued that she was too dangerous to live. Threats to the political order, be they treason, insurrection or even invasion were therefore of course to be utterly opposed.

But in the face of the carnage and chaos reeked by the zealous pursuit of religion, Elizabeth drawing upon hard-won experience had a highly developed taste for moderation and charted a clear course in religious matters striving to avoid what she saw as the dangerous excesses and ambitions of a politicised Catholicism and those of a 'hot' and zealous Puritanism. Perhaps the most famous summary of her approach can be found in the comment of the philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, that 'she did not [like] to make windows into men's souls and secret thoughts'. This emphasis is present right at the start of her reign in a speech delivered by one of her ministers which gave clear instructions that religious debates were not to employ terms like heretic or Papist or schismatic, and can also be seen throughout in the toleration shown to Catholics who were politically loyal, even after the Pope issued the sixteenth century version of a fatwa on Elizabeth's life - proclaiming open season on her assassination.

As a monarch, against the odds, Elizabeth held her nerve, she was not crippled by the issue of who might succeed her, she did not get embroiled in expensive wars or mortgage the kingdom to a foreign power through marriage, rather she defied expectations and creatively broke the mould making her one of the outstanding leaders of our history.

Elizabeth's religious outlook, rooted in prayer and perhaps especially the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, is of a piece with her politics; with her hard-won experience; her perspective on power as a woman; and her Johnian education. The voice that so startles the Dean on Ash Wednesday, crying 'enough', 'enough' ..don't pick at it, 'leave it alone' - seems acutely, painfully, aware that all manner of destructive things can be done in the name of God, by men (and it is usually men) who seek to police the hearts and minds of others and to maintain their own righteous tribes. And this strident cry of moderation hits a strangely resonant note in our contemporary world – which we might choose to replicate. So to him from whom all authority on earth and heaven flows, be glory and honour, forever and ever, Amen