



8 May 2011
The Second Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Proverbs 4
2 Peter 1 vv. 1–10

Burghley's Commonwealth: the faith and character of William Cecil

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Even its contributors have so much to learn from the newly-published College history! In this week of hustings, votes and interesting results it is fascinating to read about St John's engagement with courts, parliaments and princes, with the game of high politics. That engagement has at times been close. Across our five centuries we have turned out several Prime Ministers, and we take pride in their achievements and honour their memory. Three have served New Zealand, one Tanzania, three the United Kingdom, including Lord Palmerston, and of course the current Prime Minister of India is an Honorary Fellow. But this list is not exhaustive. It omits one man who, even in such company, was possibly the most remarkable statesman ever produced by this place. For forty years William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was Principal Secretary and Lord Treasurer to Queen Elizabeth I – her closest advisor. He and his Queen oversaw the establishment of a religious settlement across England and Wales. Together they steered the country through economic upheavals, social change, and international crises, seeing off the Spanish Armada, and financing a war on many fronts during the 1590s. Together they presided over what is still regarded, albeit simplistically, as a 'golden age' in our history.

Our College really did 'produce' William Cecil. He came to St John's in 1535, the heir to an unremarkable gentry family. He was an able young man, and St John's left its mark on him as it has left its mark on so many other able young people. Cecil lived in Cambridge for six years. He was taught by some first-class scholars, including Roger Ascham – to whom he owed his introduction to the then Princess Elizabeth – and John Cheke. Cheke provided him with another kind of introduction. Cecil married Cheke's sister Mary, even though the marriage was frowned on by his father. Given his sober reputation it is cheering to think of William Cecil diverted by love, marrying for affection rather than for money or advancement. This may not show the calculation of a statesman, but it shows instead a humanity not always visible in the grave counsellor and prudent man of business.

Life at St John's in those early days was a life of study, reflection, and prayer. Cecil learnt to work hard here, and he carried on working hard all his life. There was an order to things in College that no tidy-minded young man could possibly miss. Undergraduates would have said the morning and evening prayers set by John Fisher, and they would do as we do, and pray for Lady Margaret and for their monarch. Stephen Alford in his fine biography of Burghley reminds us that the young man would have said, every day, the wonderful words to Psalm 130: 'De profundis clamavi in te, Domine' 'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord, hear my voice'. And an education at St John's at that time demanded vociferous men: it was based on speaking out, on oral teaching and examination. In these things Cecil became proficient. They are the politician's skills.

Was Cecil a religious man? Yes, he was. A commitment to reformed Protestantism runs through so many of his recorded remarks. But the commitment was nevertheless qualified. Here too are lessons learnt from St John's. While young Cecil made friends with some who debated Lutheran opinions in Cambridge, he was also taught by and had great respect for conservative scholars, for Alban Langdale and John Seton. And he came up to Cambridge at a difficult time – perhaps the most dangerous moment St John's ever faced. In the year he arrived, the founding genius of our College, John Fisher, was executed as a traitor, and as an undergraduate Cecil witnessed the destruction of Fisher's tomb in the Chapel, and the humiliation and disgrace of senior figures, the Master Nicholas Metcalfe among them. A first brush with politics showed the wisdom of caution!

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Methodically, Cecil worked out his own path. He started from a conviction that the Church had become corrupt, and that no state could prosper before God in such a condition. But that conviction was subjected to his understanding that in sixteenth-century Europe true religion could only be defended by a ruler and her counsellors. He always believed that there was out there across the Channel a Catholic conspiracy striving to recover nations lost to Rome. Faced with this – possibly exaggerated – conspiracy it was his job to make policy and to urge what he thought was principled and right upon his Queen. He could urge these things with passion. Yet it was for the monarch to listen or not, just as she pleased. Under the Catholic Queen Mary Cecil had conformed, heard Mass, made confession. He had been close to Mary's Archbishop of Canterbury, Reginald Pole. He knew that he could only press ideas so far. The boundary was obedience to the sovereign. Without that, everything that held society together was lost.

Here are the realities of Tudor England. There was no police force, no standing army, no vast bureaucracy imposing a government's wishes on the counties and their landed elites. If those elites were not persuaded, cajoled, browbeaten into cooperation with the sovereign, nothing got done. If he wanted to remain in office and govern effectively, the Minister had to be a model of deference and humility.

Of course Cecil wanted to stay in office. Loss of office was a risky process in Tudor England. But there was more to this than self-preservation. Cambridge is what it is today because of the support received from Tudor statesmen. No statesman was more influential than William Cecil. The diligent young scholar at St John's was for nearly forty years Chancellor of the University – longer even than John Fisher. He encouraged benefactions, steered the sons of powerful colleagues to Cambridge, settled disputes between Colleges, managed processes by which Masters were chosen and implemented the most important constitutional reforms in the University's history, the Statutes of 1570. When Mary Cheke died young, she was buried at Great St Mary's, Cecil married Mildred Cooke, a formidable woman who also did her bit for the College, paying for fires which warmed our Hall in winter on Sundays and Holy Days, during the coldest months in a cold University town, in England's little ice age. When Mildred died, in 1589, the great statesman was devastated, bewildered by his loss.

Cecil was not often bewildered. He was tough, resilient, as a Tudor courtier had to be. Downplaying his ambitions, in Christian modesty, he took every opportunity to exploit office and build up the wealth and standing of his children. Most of those opportunities were principled. By modern standards the Elizabethan court was spectacularly corrupt, but that is the point. These are modern standards. Cecil was no more – if no less – venal than his colleagues, and he took the bribes and perks of office to build his family up to greatness. This is what the statesman did. Cecil's widely-circulated advice to his son makes us smile today in its directness and insistence on prudence. The chapter we heard earlier from the Book of Proverbs can easily be seen as his template, just as Cecil has so often been regarded as a model for Polonius. William's advice articulates the thoughts of one whose diplomacy and presence have brought him far. Building for the future, he cannot let his descendents throw everything away.



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All these threads – loyalty, worldliness, learning, love of family, caution, and faith – come together in death. Like many another elderly Johnian the elderly Cecil looked back, realised that he was ‘the only person living of that time and education’, and asked himself where the years had gone. In his will, revised the year he died, Cecil recalled his debt to his godly parents and his College, recalled that under their direction he came, ‘to have knowledge of the Gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ’, knowledge of Salvation, like knowledge in other spheres of life. Knowledge was forever the key. Here is another vignette from that final year: The Queen visited him; she spoon-fed the dying man with her own hand. She could frustrate him, and he her, but the trust did not fail. Within a fortnight of his end, his fellow Privy Counsellors were still seeking his advice on matters of state. Who else should give it? Endless work pursued him to the end. ‘Send me some good hours’, he asked of God, ‘for I have no good days’. Well, these are the frailties of age, but they are something more too. They are the summation of a life lived as close as a statesman ever can to the essence of his own faith. In his last letter to his son he advises young Robert to ‘serve God by serving the queen. For all other service is indeed bondage to the devil’. That is no easy platitude. He meant every word. William Cecil’s whole life was ordered, his thought processes summarised in the obsessive lists of pros and contras he drew up when deliberating questions of state. When drawing up our own lists, pro and contra, it is impossible I think to deny a great Johnian the respect and honour that he craved.