

Evensong Sermon - St Paul's Cathedral - 15 June 2008

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

A number of years ago, before Bishop Michael was Canon Pastor; before his episcopal, or even archidiaconal responsibilities, when he was a humble Team Rector, I was a junior part of that Team. So all these years later it was a privilege and a joy to be invited by him to speak at his new pad. Or at least that was what I thought until I saw the readings for Evening Prayer set for the day, and I quickly cottoned on to why he was so generously inviting me on this occasion... As one who usually starts with the scriptures in preaching, on the basis that at least where I am not theologically sound, at least the Bible is, I struggled a bit with these passages: Beelzebub in the NT; and in the OT, King Achish says *"Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me?"*. Frightening words for any visiting preacher to hear in a reading! Had this been a Eucharistic service, I am sure I could have worked on some interesting reflections picking up on King David's request for 'five loaves of bread', even if he did not mention fish. But this is not a Eucharist. So I started to explore other possible themes.

My home parish is Copthorne, near Gatwick airport, just into Sussex if you were on your way down to Brighton from here. One of my congregation reminded me that I ought not to lose sight of the fact that **Magna Carta** was signed on 15 June in 1215.

King John, who as AA Milne reminds us, was *'not a good man'*, had a run-in with the church. About how the Crown appoints bishops.

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose". How things change (!)

However King John forgot that if you are having a row, it is risky to have it with those who write the history books. Those monks were not called "clerks" in holy orders for nothing - and perhaps that was the start of his losing his reputation, becoming known as *'not a good man'*.

Magna Carta however enshrined a number of rights that remain in the law of the land even today. Not only the *'almost late lamented'* *habeus corpus* if we are to understand David Davis, but also some pertinent Church law too. I brought a copy with me. Apparently there were many copies made - it is

probably the sort of thing St Paul's has an original copy of, in a drawer downstairs somewhere:

- *Clause 1 says: FIRST, We have granted to God, and by this our present Charter have confirmed, for Us and our Heirs for ever, that the Church of England shall be free, and shall have all her whole Rights and Liberties inviolable.*

The freedoms of the Church of England were at one point from the constraints of a monarch; but were later used against as a protection from those across the Tiber too. No point in letting a good law go to waste.

There are perhaps some other themes around today we may pick up on. Our American brothers and sisters have brought us many good gifts, but I am sometimes a little dubious about some of imports that have made it across 'the pond'. Not all of them fit easily into British Culture as perhaps rock & roll, or McDonald's have been able to. Take *trick or treat*, for example - or, for today, Father's Day. They have the reputation of being rather tacky, commercial enterprises, with little substance.

I paused to think over fatherhood a little though. I have two teenage girls, who keep me from becoming too complacent about my place in the world. They greeted the news of my being at St Paul's this evening with the degree of indifference only teenagers can. One said she was working, attempting to earn some money to offset the looming Student Loan; - or to buy another pair of shoes - I forget which. The other decided to - er - stay at home. Probably watching '*Scrubs*'.

One American certainly knew where my teenage children were coming from was **Mark Twain**. Even if he later changed his opinion, he famously said of his father:

"When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around.

But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

In our family we have been privileged to have some excellent role-models of fatherhood, though I am aware that for some individuals that is not the case. It is interesting to observe for example that though Twain made a joke about his father, in reality his father died of pneumonia when Mark Twain was 11 years

old. For some, fathers have been absent, for others they have been abusive - which gives us such great difficulty when trying to bring to people the prayer that Jesus taught us. Our Father.

That leads us to perhaps another echo for today. A local saint. - Well almost local, and almost a saint.

Almost a saint, because **Evelyn Underhill** the *Anglican writer on mysticism & worship*, who lived between 1875-1941, is commemorated on 15 June in the Common Worship lectionary.

And almost local, because she was educated at King's College for Women, London, where she read history and botany; and later elected a Fellow.

She was in her thirties before she began to explore religion. At first, she wrote on the mystics, most notably in her book *Mysticism*, published in 1911. Her spiritual journey took her from the Church of England, through the Roman Catholic Church, and brought her in 1921 back to the Church of England, in which she had been baptized and confirmed.

From the mid-1920s, she became highly-regarded as a retreat conductor and an influential spiritual director. Of her many books, *Worship*, published in 1936, embodied her approach to what she saw as the mystery of faith.

To quote from one of her meditations, possibly a retreat script:

From Abba - a treatise on The Lord's Prayer

*In those rare glimpses of Christ's own life of prayer,
which the Gospels vouchsafe to us,
we always notice the perpetual reference to the unseen Father;
so much more vividly present to Him [Christ] than anything that is seen.
Behind that daily life into which He entered so generously,
filled, as it was, with constant appeals to His practical pity and help,
there is ever the sense of that strong and tranquil Presence,
ordering all things
and bringing them to their appointed end;
not with a rigid and mechanical precision,
but with the freedom of a living, creative, cherishing thought and love.*

Throughout His life,

*the secret,
utterly obedient conversation of Jesus with His Father goes on.
He always snatches opportunities for it,
and at every crisis He returns to it
as the unique source of confidence and strength;
the right and reasonable relation between the soul and its Source.*

I'm not very good with words - though here Underhill has done well to capture my imagination too. I often use graphic images in my home territory, projected on to a screen that subtly appears, and can then disappear, whilst I am preaching - though I understand that practice has got some clergy into deep trouble.

The image I think I would be projecting now, had I had the opportunity here, would be **Rembrandt's** *Loving Father or Prodigal Son*.

Painted in his old age, Rembrandt's portrayal is of one who has discovered that 'the old man has learned a lot', - as has his son. Here is a father, an abused and ignored father, who still reaches out to caress his wayward offspring, welcoming the prodigal home again.

So on this - Father's Day - let us reflect on our God and our Father

Of the Son's relationship with the Father

Of the prodigal son's relationship with his father

Of our relationship with our own human father, if we knew them

For those who are fathers, of our relationship with our children

For single parents who have had to be both mother and father to their children

Let us remember the pain of strained or broken parental relationships

Let us seek ways to enhance the status and quality of fatherhood in our families, communities, and churches

Let us remember our Heavenly Father's desire to welcome and to forgive

We return to Evelyn Underhill, in her meditation called Abba, the word Jesus used to speak to God, the word sometimes respectfully translated as Daddy:

Our inheritance IS God, our Father and Home.

We recognize Him,

[Underhill, referring to St. John of the Cross, quotes]

because we already carry in our hearts a rough sketch of the beloved countenance.

Looking into those deeps,

as into a quiet pool in the dark forest,

we there find looking back at us the Face we implicitly long for and already know. [The Spiritual Canticle. 2nd Version, stanza . 17]

It is set in another world, another light:

yet it is here.

As we realize this, our prayer widens,

until it embraces the extremes of awe-struck adoration and confident love and fuses them in one.

Let us pray:

A Collect for Evelyn Underhill

O God, Origin, Sustainer, and End of all your creatures:

Grant that your Church, taught by your servant *Evelyn Underhill*,
guarded evermore by your power,

and guided by your Spirit into the light of truth,

may continually offer to you all glory and thanksgiving,

and attain with your saints to the blessed hope of everlasting life,

which you have promised us by our Savior Jesus Christ;

who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God,

now and for ever. Amen.

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