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**“REMEMBER!”  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON KING CHARLES THE MARTYR**

**St. Laurence’s Church, Ludlow, Sunday, 21 January 2001  
Sermon by Sir Leslie Fielding, Reader**

Today is the Third Sunday of Epiphany, the season in which the Church celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles : to be more precise, to the Magi who journeyed to the cradle in Bethlehem. This Sunday, like most Sundays, is also a Saint’s or Holy Day : celebrating Agnes, Child Martyr of Rome, who died in 304. Next Sunday will be the day of Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval philosopher and teacher, who died in 1274.

The English have their Saints and Martyrs, too. Tuesday week, 30<sup>th</sup> January, commemorates King Charles I, who was beheaded in 1649, on the orders of Oliver Cromwell, outside the Banqueting House in Whitehall. It is about Charles the Martyr that I shall talk to you today.

Some of you will have read, when you were at school, that great skit on English history, called “1066 And All That”, by Sellers and Yeatman. They wrote, tongue in cheek, about the English Civil War, that the Royalists were “Wrong, but Romantic”, but that the Roundheads were “Right, but Repulsive”. There was something in that!

Hereabouts, people certainly knew all about it at the time. Mr. David Lloyd records, in his history of the town, that Ludlovians were instinctively royalist. Internal divisions did nevertheless occur. Up there in the High Chancel, there are memorials to a Roundhead, Major Richard Salway (with the inscription that he “sacrificed all and everything in his power in support of public liberty and in opposition to absolute power”), and to John Walters, a Baron of the Exchequer, who lost his post through opposition to the King. Although the town was a royalist stronghold throughout the civil war, and received a visit from King Charles in August 1645, the Castle was forced to surrender the following year, after a Roundhead siege lasting 33 days. So it was not a happy time. The nation was badly split ; there were arguments (good, bad and indifferent) on both sides.

By instinct and upbringing, I am a king’s man, myself. I would not have been comfortable with the puritanism and cant of the other side : I love laughter and decent vintage claret too much, for that. I am also entirely at home with hierarchy, having held the Queen’s Commission for many years, and been accustomed to receiving orders - and even, in later years, to giving them. If I had met King Charles in person, I would, like most other Englishmen, have been both charmed and impressed. I might, just might, have given the Parliamentarians a hearing ; but, when the chips were down, I would have

been drawn to the King's banner. Today, I have no doubt that the execution of the King was a crime as well as a tragedy.

But I am aware, with the hindsight of history, that the King, as a secular ruler, made serious mistakes : he was tactless with Parliament ; he mishandled the Scots ; he lacked political even-handedness ; he allowed Archbishop Laud's Star Chamber to be nasty to the "dissenters". He was also drawn to the theory of the "Divine Right of Kings". In France, this idea led to absolute monarchy and ultimately to the horrors of the French Revolution. In England, the compromise reached, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, between Monarch and Parliament and People, was to permit the governance of these islands to evolve peacefully with the times, from the Restoration onwards.

Yet it is not for the King's political views that the Church of England commemorates this martyrdom, but for his religious integrity and example. There was a special personal quality to Charles I which left its mark on his contemporaries, even Cromwell : an honesty, unselfishness and grace which marked him out from other men. In some ways, Charles was himself an epiphany, a "showing" of the divine nature ; as indeed, are all members of what we call, in the Apostles Creed, the "Communion of Saints". And he has something to teach us, still.

Time travel, mercifully, is still beyond our reach. But if Charles were somehow able now to walk the earth again, one of the things which might surprise him is that we have abandoned Galileo in favour of a "Flat Earth". The notion of a "Station in Life", a social hierarchy, has vanished completely. Mitred Archbishops and landed Dukes, Prime Ministers and Ambassadors, red-robed Judges and university Professors, no longer impress in the way they once did. Traditional respect for rank or office has evaporated. Authority in matters of faith and morals, where still asserted from above, is often disputed or merely disregarded from below. We have all lost, as well as no doubt gained, from these curious changes.

Life has also become particularly difficult for national political leaders of all kinds and - King Charles I would notice, with a wry smile - for the House of Commons whose middle class privileges Oliver Cromwell was so zealous to defend. Today's politicians and parliamentarians are subject to generally low popular esteem ; to perpetual leaks of confidential memoranda ; and to "trial-by-media" of all aspects of their lives. The Westminster model which the Victorians admired, no longer carries all before it. Parliament itself seems due for reform.

To some extent, the political class is itself to blame. It is a sad spectacle when Cabinet ministers cling over-tenaciously to office, and finally surrender it with so little grace. It is some time now since we have seen the dignity and self-sacrifice of a Lord Carrington, when he offered himself as a scapegoat for General Galtieri's occupation of the Falklands. Last week, two Cabinet ministers in Germany resigned in response to 10 cases of BSE in the dairy herds of that country. I have not noticed any ministerial resignations

in this country, where BSE began, and where it has claimed the lives of many thousands of animals and, through nvCJD, the lives of approaching a hundred human beings.

Again, to quote the Economist magazine a year or so back, British voters seem “unimpressed by the way MP’s conduct themselves in the House of Commons”. On the one hand, too much time seems to be devoted to rubbishing and sneering, not only across the floor of the House of Commons, but in self-exculpatory political memoirs, to say nothing of backstairs back-stabbings by spin doctors and media manipulators. On the other hand, too many back benchers feel powerless and superfluous ; intimidated and told what to do by Party Whips. There has been correspondence in The Times newspaper this past week, about “Honesty’s place in politics, today”

Charles I, for all his human frailty, and for all his particular political prejudices, could not have been more different. He might well have saved his life, historians argue, if he had been prepared to give ground on Episcopacy. The sacrifice, in the Church of England, of the Apostolic Tradition, as the then Puritans and Presbyterians would have wished, could have purchased the physical survival of the King. But Charles was opposed to religious extremism. He was not a sectarian. He wanted a national church that was both “Catholick” and reformed ; “Apostolick”, yet unsubjected to Rome. All his life, he had said that the Church of England should “hold the middle way”. He declared, on the scaffold, that “I die a Christian according to the profession of the Church of England, as I found it left me by my father”. And his last word was : “Remember!”

So the King “carried the can” and accepted calmly the consequences of his actions. On the testimony of independent eyewitness, he showed no sign of fear. There was no bombast, or orgy of self-justification. No spinning or sneering. No memoirs either. He did not rubbish his opponents or abuse his captors ; rather, he explicitly and publicly forgave them. He bore himself with the dignity of Kingship : with the innate authority of the anointed wearer of the Crown of England. His faith and conduct so transformed him, that he bore, at the last, the unmistakable imprint of Christ’s own example. Thereby was born, in the Yeatsian sense, “a terrible beauty”, which has ever since haunted the conscience of England.

The Royal Martyr was, in matters of the Christian faith and morals, absolutely sincere and committed on essentials. Theologically, he was not immoderate by the standards of his Age – less intolerant of “papists” and “dissenters” than Queen Elizabeth I, for example. He was a devoted family man ; not a coarse, drooling figure, as his father, James I, had been ; nor a compulsive womaniser, like his oldest son, Charles II. Not a papist, like his wife and his younger son, James II ; nor a kill-joy Geneva Calvinist either, as some of his clergy were. He said his prayers regularly ; liturgically, he was a Prayer Book man.

Indeed, Charles would have been entirely at home with the service of Matins this morning ; recognised all the readings ; and considered that he had acted upon them. Like the ancient Hebrews in this morning’s Old Testament Lesson from Numbers, about the “Cloud” which covered the tabernacle, and which was the symbol of the presence of

God, Charles followed that “Cloud” wherever he believed it led him. He was familiar, from Psalm 33, with the fact that “There is no King saved by the multitude of an host” (i.e. “A king does not win because of his powerful army”). He had often listened to what St. Paul tells the Corinthians, that each of us is to remain what we are when we accept God’s call, and that what matters is to obey God’s Commandments.

If I am not very much mistaken, Charles I still prays for the safeguard of the Church for which he died ; and for the continued proclamation of the Good News of Christ to all who dwell here below, on the contemporary “Flat Earth” of the United Kingdom.

So, if you have a chance, on Tuesday week, go to St. Giles’s Church, to attend the service to be held there by Anne Barge. Or walk down Whitehall to the Banqueting House in London that morning, for the national act of commemoration. You will be welcome. If neither, then just think of the man, on the day ; and pray that the Faith, Courage and Grace of Charles the Martyr may serve as an example to all engaged in British public and political life today.

Let us, indeed, “REMEMBER”.

AMEN.

The Collect for 30 January :

*“O Everlasting King and Lord of Creation, by whose heavenly Grace your servant CHARLES triumphed in suffering, and glorified the Church by his death ; grant that we, persevering in Faith to the end, may, with him, attain the crown of life eternal, through Jesus Christ Our Lord”.*