

The Blackburn Branch of the Prayer Book Society 'PBS 2014.1'

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PRAYER BOOK SOCIETY MATINS AT DOWNHAM, 26 January 2014



Hardy members of the Blackburn Branch of the Prayer Book Society braved gale force winds and incessant rain when they worshipped in Downham's historic Parish Church of St. Leonard on Sunday 26th January 2014.

(The wind nearly blew us over as we entered the churchyard and the Revd. Alan Reid, Chairman of the Blackburn Branch of the PBS, said that when he left home that morning he expected to see his wife hang-gliding over Sabden!)

No one knows how long there has been a church at Downham. During the rebuilding of 1910 traces of what were believed to be early Norman or Anglo-Saxon foundations were unearthed. The presence, within the parish, of a field called Kirkacre - a pure Saxon word - adds credence to an estimate of 1,000 years.

The church, with fifteenth century tower and main body of 1910, stands at the top of the steep main street of the village in a perfect and harmonious grouping with Downham Hall, home of the Asshetons since several months before the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558.



The present Lord Clitheroe is Patron of the parish church and he and Lady Clitheroe were there to welcome us, which did much to warm us, as did the glowing colours of the East window.

The energetic singing of the committed choir spurred us all to sing with a will the Venite, Psalm 121, the Te Deum and Jubilate, and also the hymns.



L-R The Archdeacon of Lancaster, the choir and the Revd. Alan Reid who led the service so beautifully.

Not only could most of us, who were brought up on the Book of Common Prayer, recite the whole service from memory, but we who treasure well-known hymns could sing them from memory, too!

*The church's one foundation
Holy, holy, holy
Love divine
Glorious things of Thee are spoken.*

Lord Clitheroe read both the lessons – they were short but memorable:

Job: 19.25 – I know that my Redeemer liveth...

Colossians 3:3 – For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God...

Now, be it confessed, that most of us, with the best will in the world, when listening to sermons, tend to let our attention wander after ten minutes. **But not so that morning!**



The Archdeacon of Lancaster, the **Venerable Michael Everitt**, had not only prepared a sermon for us, for that church, and for Downham, but he also delivered it in such a way that our attention was riveted throughout.

Here's what he said:

The Assheton Sermon 2014

"When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." Col 3:3

I am not a Lancashire lad and whilst I am loyal to the Duke of Lancaster and the village where I had my piano lessons had a depiction of the martyrdom of Thomas, Earl of Lancaster in Pontefract Castle alongside a wall painting of the martyrdom of Thomas à Becket, the machinations of the Lancaster/York rivalry is at the level of interest and pleasure that the right side won.

I am a child of the midlands, and specifically North Oxfordshire, an area of undulating hills where the ironstone, rich with the metal is a rusty red and the soil a similar hue.

In the mid 17th century the villages of my locality were to shape our history and one was to gain a dreadful notoriety. The battle of Edge Hill on the 23 October 1642 was the first major battle (Powick Bridge being more of a skirmish) in the English Civil War with 15 000 men on both sides, the Royalist seeking to advance through the Parliamentary line.



A Thousand died and the estimate is that 3000 were wounded, and the royalist gains were minor. Sir Ralph Assheton along with General Ralph Assheton took part on (as Lord Clitheroe called it) the wrong, the *parliamentarian* side.

Sir Ralph Assheton lived through this time, (1605- January 1680). He had been born in the reign of James the sixth and first, in the year of the Gunpowder plot itself.

He forged his political career during the arguments of Short and Long Parliaments, serving as MP for Clitheroe as well as in 1633 being High Sheriff.

He succeeded to his father's Baronetcy in 1644.

On the restoration of Charles II he served once more in the Convention and Cavalier Parliaments and was re-elected in 1679 once more as MP for Clitheroe. As recorded in the elegant memorial opposite me testifies, he married twice (Dorothy and Elisabeth) but sadly his son by Elisabeth was to predecease him.

He lived through turbulent times. The civil war had dreadful losses for the country, 4% of the total English population were to die as a direct consequence of it, and even higher losses in the other kingdoms of Great Britain. Families had to make choices, some were divided, others changed allegiances. (The Lord of the Manor from my childhood, Lord Saye and Sale gained the nickname "Old Subtlety", for such were his pragmatic skills.) The King was beheaded (also on the 30th January, but in 1649, 31 years to the day before Sir Ralph's death), an 11-year Republic put in place and



1st edition. 1662

then the Kingdom and old ways restored from 1660, including the **Book of Common Prayer in 1662.**

The normal contemporary practice at a funeral is to have a eulogy, a "good word" about the individual, that honours them, gives an understanding of their life and impact, and if delivered by a parson includes the dynamic of hope of the resurrection.

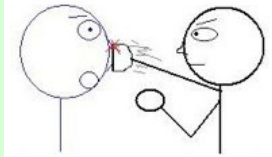
An appropriate text for Sir Ralph might be Job 1:1:

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil."



This is a modern manifestation. The burial service that was re-established in the Book of Common Prayer in 1662, does not even give scope for the person's name to be used.

(A modern innovation, which caused one of my predecessors as curate of Cleveleys to be punched on the nose by his training incumbent.



Thankfully I did not have a pugilistic Vicar and I hope Canon Chard, who also served his title there was spared such treatment.)

The dynamic at the personal level is more on the challenge to the listener to amend their sinful lives.

The resurrection is of course central to the service, with the second sentence being our text for today from Job;

"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:

26 And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:

27 Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another;"

this is more a statement of fact as starkly presented as the brutality of death. This should not come as too much of a surprise given the context of the turmoil of the civil war period, the context of Ralph's life.

It might come as a surprise to some to discover that the selection of psalms that fill the Burial Service of the Book of Common Prayer does not include the 23rd psalm. (The deposited book of the 1920s did.) I ask your indulgence as I wish to explore a verse from it, as I think it gives a context for today.

At the end of last year, within a 9 week period, my father suffered 3 significant bereavements, that of his wife, his youngest nephew and on Christmas day, his sister.

My mother's funeral was in our village church; my cousin's, at which I had the privilege of officiating 2 days before Christmas in a Crematorium chapel in Worcestershire; my Aunt's, was on Thursday of last week at the same chapel.

As a family we feel a little bruised, and emotionally flat. "Yea, thou I travel through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."



Many preachers lose sight of the nature of the valley.

They preach about it being death and not what is in the text, **the shadow.** It is this darkness that dulls the contrasts and light

quality, caused by a large object (in this case death itself) obliterating the light source and casting a pall over the bereaved, as heavy as any placed on a coffin that we are travelling through.

Death itself, especially in the understanding of the Book of Common Prayer is our entry into the fullness of Eternal life; it is the bereaved that travel through the valley of its shadow.



Ralph lived in shadowed times. It is therefore no surprise that one of the 2 texts should come from the book of Job, that tale of a man beset by many woes and trials and yet one who could still say, "I know that my redeemer liveth."

It is times of crisis, and especially sustained crisis that character is formed, and our understandings of life proven, for Ralph to place as his legacy to the people of this parish the proclamation of the totality of Christ and the knowledge of resurrection born in suffering shows us more of his character than any contemporary eulogy or historical reflection.

The English Civil War shaped and scarred the landscape of my youth and its negative legacy still affected some communities and their relationships to their neighbours.

The civil war in Syria will sadly do the same, as with all conflicts.

(But then in this neighbourhood the War of Roses still has the same impact.)

It is easy for the shadows of such times not just to be cast over our lives, but in our darkened vision, to be a reason for stumbling and hesitations. It is into these contexts that we need to hold to Ralph's texts of **"Good News"** and inspiration. Not simply looking back, but forward to what we know we have in Christ and his resurrection. As St Paul puts it in the third chapter of his epistle to the Colossians:



Lady Clitheroe

Plaque in the Assheton Chapel of Downham Church (see left)



Dr John Bertalot - committee member, His Honour Edward Slinger - President of the Blackburn Branch of the PBS.



"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.

Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

When Christ, who is our life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory."



The Queen Mother's favourite view from Downham Church - but not in that morning's weather!



Archdeacon Everitt, Ms Elizabeth Smithies - Committee member, Lord Clitheroe - Vice President, Neil Inkley - Secretary & Treasurer of the Blackburn Branch of the PBS, The Revd. Alan Reid - Chairman.

