

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly | 6 January 2007

The Epiphany of Christ

The Revd Hugh Valentine | Readings: Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

surprised in the closet: of epiphanies, generosity and gaiety

We owe Sir Christopher Wren a great debt. There is hardly an occasion when I enter this space that I don't think of the phrase from Psalm 38 "thou hast set my feet in a *large room*". It makes me think of God's 'many mansions' [KJV, John 14.8: "in my Father's house are many mansions"]. All – and more - intimations of God's stupendous generosity made manifest in this airy, inviting building by Mr Wren and nowadays by the emphasis we – as a Christian community¹ – place on hospitality and on giving one another room to explore.

I doubt it has always been so; it is as easy to romanticise buildings and localities as it is people. Let me take you back to the decade in which this church was built and consecrated. The following are accounts taken from the proceedings of the Old Bailey during the 1680s - a procession of rogues and sinners, all our fellow parishioners.

Meet first, our neighbour Katherine Forwood, of the parish of 'St. James's Westminster' (the correct description of us, by the way) who was 'Indicted for stealing from John Olmer, on the 1st. of December 1687 the sum of 'Fifteen Shillings in Money, [from his] Closet'. She was Mr Olmer's servant. And he, suspecting that she was responsible for other money that had gone missing '*surprised her in the Closet*' as the Old Bailey record rather quaintly puts it. She was found guilty of 'simple grand larceny' three hundred and eighteen years ago this very week. And she was sentenced to whipping.

Then there was James Moran, indicted for stealing 'twenty pieces of old Gold, called Guinea's, from one Mary le Fever'. Luckily for him, as the record puts it, 'all the Witnesses that appeared against the Prisoner were very slender' and their accounts - 'appearing to be patched up only with Circumstances' - failed to persuade the judge. The defendant was found not guilty.

Meet one Richard Jones, also of 'the Parish of St James Westminster', who in 1685 was 'Indicted for Breaking the House of one George Gill and

¹ At St James's we prefer the term 'community' to 'congregation'.

Stealing thence a silk Petticoat, a pair of Sheets, a Gown, with a Gold Ring and divers other Goods, to a very considerable value'. The witnesses against Mr Jones proved rather more credible and less slender and he was sentenced to death.

Finally, another neighbour of ours, one Elizabeth Clancey alias Morris, of St James's Westminster, who in February 1688 was 'Indicted for that she, together with Robert Starling and Robert Banwell did break [into] the House of Thomas Phillips Esq., on the 18th of November 1687, between the Hours of Twelve and One at Night, and taking thence Eight Holland Sheets, Eleven Pillow-beers, one dozen of Napkins, a Waistcoat and other Goods'. The Evidence against the Prisoner was plain, the goods being 'found stuffed in a pair of Breeches upon her [person] by the Constable'. She was found guilty and sentenced to death – a sentence that was 'respited for pregnancy' as the record notes.

Women who claimed they were pregnant at the time they were sentenced to death could "plead their belly". Such women (and there were many) were then examined by a jury of matrons (chosen from women in the courtroom), and, if found to be 'quick with child' their punishment was respited until after the baby was born. In principle, the punishment could then be carried out. In practice, the cost of caring for the newborn child meant that the mother was normally pardoned.

There was another way in which sentencing could be modified, until finally abolished in the 1820s, and that was for the defendant to plead 'benefit of clergy'. This did not mean – as you might imagine – that they were themselves clergy and entitled to special treatment. Rather, many defendants found guilty of felonies were spared the death penalty and were given a lesser punishment because of a right accorded to the church during the middle ages to punish its own members should they be convicted of a crime. The convicted person was then handed over to the clergy who were free to determine the punishment.

With the clergy being considered a softer touch, many of those convicted did in fact plead 'benefit of clergy' including in this parish. Since it was difficult to prove who was affiliated to the church, convicts who claimed 'benefit of clergy' were required in Court to read a passage from the Bible. Judges usually chose verses from the 51st Psalm, which came to be known as the "neck verses", since they saved many people from the gallows.

To read these Old Bailey accounts is to be acquainted with the excessive and grim punishments routinely meted out just a few hundred short years ago: whipping, branding, transportation, public hanging, the pillory, burning at the stake, being drawn and quartered, and finally, being delivered to the surgeons for live dissection followed by hanging in chains. The latter was admired for its imagined deterrent effect.

In comparison we perhaps regard our own day as enlightened and even sophisticated. There is some truth in that – the evidence is there in the presence of defined human rights and obligations, and in respect for personal liberty. But only *some* truth.

There was a public hanging of sorts just a week ago, which involved the deliberate humiliation of the condemned man, Saddam Hussein². His is but one example of the hatred that expresses itself in disdain and contempt for other people. There are many others: they are to be found in wars, revolutions and times of social upheaval, in corporate multi-nationals, small enterprises, families, churches – in fact wherever people gather. There is a great sliding scale of hatreds, with the butchers, dictators and oppressors at one end, and then sliding and slithering down and along towards, perhaps, the rest of us whose hatreds, disdain and contempt find more muted and somehow more acceptable expression.

This realisation, paradoxically, brings only hope – that to be human is to be heir to a range of drives which include love *and* a serious and persistent element of hate. Only when acknowledged may this dangerous mix of nature allow for the possibility of love to become the force to heal hate. The so-called wicked are not uniquely separate from us. It's only a matter of degree.

James Moran – you will recall – was acquitted because the witnesses against him 'seemed slender' and their accounts 'appearing to be patched

² The execution of Saddam Hussein took place on 30 December 2006. He was sentenced to death by hanging, after being found guilty and convicted of crimes against humanity by the Iraqi Special Tribunal for the murder of 148 Iraqi Shi'ites in the town of Dujail in 1982, in retaliation for an assassination attempt against him. The Iraqi government released an official videotape of his execution, showing him being led to the gallows, and ending after his head was in the hangman's noose. International public controversy arose when an unauthorized cell phone recording of the hanging showed him falling through the trap door of the gallows. The audio, which was not in the official video, revealed taunts between Saddam and the executioners. The unprofessional and undignified atmosphere of the execution drew criticism around the world from nations that both oppose and support capital punishment.

up only with Circumstances’. And Mistress Forwood was ‘surprised in the closet’ by her accuser, which turned out to be her undoing. Witnesses seeming ‘slender’ and ‘appearing to be patched up only with Circumstances’ and the accused being ‘surprised in the closet’. Let me apply these telling turns of phrase to the feast we observe today – that of Christ’s Epiphany.

The word ‘epiphany’ means ‘a revealing’. What we recall today is the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. Inevitably, churches tend to celebrate this by a ‘looking back’ to this symbolically important event. Too much of this ‘looking back’ leaves *us* in danger of becoming ourselves ‘slender witnesses’ who risk being ‘patched up only with Circumstances’. It is a constant threat – that of comfortably looking back to reported history in our attempt to follow Him who has in fact leapt far ahead.

Mistress Forwood – in the words of the Old Bailey record – was ‘surprised in the closet’ - a description perfectly straight forward in the 1680s. Today it is familiar, thanks to its use in American gay parlance to refer to the state of self-imposed invisibility of gay people, or their self-chosen their liberation from its confines. One is ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the closet. One may be ‘dragged’ from the closet. Some have closets with revolving doors. But this marvellous phrase given to us by the 17thC clerks of the Old Bailey – of being ‘*surprised* in the closet’, seems to me the perfect idea for celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany.

For we can gather in our Christian museums and ‘safe-houses’ (even the roomy airy ones with windows onto the world like this one) and look only backwards. Or we can ask God that **we** might be ‘surprised in the closet’; that we might receive some unexpected, fresh, disclosure that is the undoing of our cosy comfort, our sleep walking, our wilful ignorance. The ‘closet’ represents the concealed self where we hide our shame or bury our ignoble thoughts and doings. It is the part of the human heart that likes to operate under cover of darkness.

Katherine Forwood, James Moran, Richard Jones and Elizabeth Clancey all lived in this parish, and almost certainly entered this building as the paint was scarcely dry. Recognise them as our sisters and brothers, whether amongst the convicted or acquitted. And because God, unlike Her church, is not parochial, we must include all the others beyond the ‘parish of St

James's in the Liberty of Westminster': Those at St Martin's and St Anne's; those in the French RC church in Leicester Square; the Muslims at Regent's Park Mosque; the non believers, confused believers, the sex workers of Soho, the Hedge Fund Managers of St James's Square - all people in all places. Including the Saddams and the Pol Pots, the Tonys and the Georges³, the person to your left, even me and my St James's colleagues (for you never know when you might need 'benefit of clergy'....).

Today, on this Feast of the Epiphany, why not ask God to surprise you in your closet. It is the best 'outing' you could hope for.

Hugh Valentine

³ Mr Blair and Mr Bush, UK Prime Minister and USA President respectively.