

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting, 8th March 2014, at Gustaf Adolf Church, Liverpool

The Rt Rev Dr Michael Ipgrave : Sermon preached at the Eucharist

Today I'm thinking of the people of Lincoln because 104 years ago today, on 8th March, 1910, their Bishop, Edward King, died. The Church of England's calendar commemorates him. "We knew a saint had lived among us," people said at that time, and those words have been echoed by many since his death.

As a very young curate I remember a very old woman telling me that one of the most memorable events of her childhood was, as a young girl of about 4 years of age, seeing Edward King on the platform of a railway station where he was changing trains. He didn't speak to her, she said. But he smiled at her, and her smile gave her an encouragement which had never left her.

People who have never met him before said that, on meeting Edward King, his face was somehow familiar to them, and one of them went further and said, "The bishop's face was I think the face that God meant us all to have – the face we see in Jesus Christ, the face of the humanity that we should be."

So, who was Edward King? What might he mean for us as Anglicans and Lutherans?

He was born in 1829 in the very heart of the establishment of the Church of England. His father was Archdeacon of Rochester and his grandfather, at the same time, was Bishop of Rochester. He was educated at Oriel College, Oxford, where I also went. He was ordained at the age of 25 and at 29 he became Chaplain and then Principal of Cuddesden Theological College, just to the south of Oxford, where I also went!

After some time teaching pastoral theology at the University of Oxford in 1885 at the age of 56 he became Bishop of Lincoln, then as now a largely agricultural diocese, and then as now with real acute but often hidden problems of rural poverty. He served as Bishop of Lincoln until his death, aged 80, on this day in 1910.

In many ways a straightforward life, lived in faithful service of Jesus Christ within the Church of England. But during that ministry there was one huge moment of crisis in 1890 – the Lincoln Judgement – when he found himself being tried by his own Archbishop in a sort of court of law as a result of agitations brought by Low Church Protestant Anglicans who objected to Edward King's use of things which are now very common in Anglican liturgy. The sign of the cross, the use of lighted candles, and so on.

It's quite hard today to imagine the passions raised by those issues in the late nineteenth century. But Edward King suffered a degree of persecution and vilification at that time. But he took to heart the words of the Gospel we heard read this morning (Matthew 5.10-12) and acted kindly and gently even when persecuted by his own Church.

And it was for that that he was known, for his serene trust in God, for his genuine love of, and interest in, people of every background, and above all for his constant emphasis on the life of Christ as something that's really available to people as a model for their own lives. "Christ," he once said, "has become to his people not a far off name, but the sum of many satisfactions." And although he grew up and lived throughout his life in the bosom of the Established Church,

he acted in a completely non-churchy way. He said once, "I wish that more humans would become true Christians, and I also wish that more Christians would become truly human."

Edward King was not without faults. No saint is! Like every other Anglican bishop today I hold a deep and grudging resentment against him because he was the first bishop in the Church of England since the Reformation to insist on wearing a mitre, and encumbered all of us called to the episcopal office with what must be the most ridiculous headgear in the world! Nevertheless, he was a deeply loveable man, a human being who inhabited the role of bishop in a way that encouraged and inspired hundreds of thousands of people.

So what does that mean for us as Anglicans and Lutherans?

Edward King was not, it has to be said, a great fan of Lutheranism. But that's probably because he had never really encountered Lutheran Christianity as a living Christian reality. He belonged to a High Church party of his time which was in any case suspicious of Protestantism and also particularly suspicious of Lutheranism because at that time it was identified with liberal tendencies in German theology, something that was deplored by Dr Pusey. However, had he met in substantial number Lutheran Christians probably the same thing would have happened as happened in his ministry in Lincolnshire where he met many, many Methodists. They viewed him as a High Church bishop with suspicion, until they met him and heard him preach about Jesus. After one sermon one old Methodist farmhand went up to him and said, "Bishop, you're naught but an old Methodie!" High praise indeed!

That which is deepest, that which is most passionate in our faith, that which we really believe in such a way that it shapes the life that we live, that will always speak from Christian to Christian across denominations, from Christian to Christian within denominations, it will always speak from faith to faith, it will always speak from human to human. Because what God gives us above all is the gift of friendship in our pilgrimage to bind us together, as we know in this Society.

But that does not decrease our distinctiveness, the very things that make us who we are. Edward King was very, very much a son of the Church of England. He could not be imagined as a Lutheran. And speaking out of the heart of our tradition and our ethos he was a source of blessing to Anglicans, just as Lutherans in every country can point to women and men who are sources of blessing and encouragement from the very heart of their own traditions and ethos. We may or may not call them saints, as many of us would call Edward King 'a saint', but it is in recognising, in honouring and in learning from the humanity of Christ as it is distinctively lived out in our own ways of being Christian that we grow and live together. May God continue to give us in this Society the Spirit's gift of friendship to that end.

Just before he died Edward King wrote this to his diocese: 'My great wish has been to lead you to be Christ-like Christians. In Christ is the only true hope of unity and peace. In him may we be united to God and to one another. May God guide and bless you all and refresh you with the increasing consciousness of his presence and his love. I am, to the end, your friend and Bishop. Edward Lincoln.'