

ALFRED THE CHRISTIAN

MUSIC: Antiphon ‘In Paradisum’

<i>In paradisum deducant te angeli:</i>	May angels lead thee into paradise:
<i>in tuo adventu suscipiant te martyres,</i>	may martyrs receive thee at thy coming
<i>et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Ierusalem.</i>	and lead thee into the holy city, Jerusalem.

Today we are reflecting on Alfred the Christian, and experiencing some of the faith that Alfred lived by. First we are going to explore the influence of a book written by the 6th century Pope Gregory. Pope Gregory was elected Pope in 590 and died in 604.

The work, confusingly, has various titles. The Latin title is *Regula Pastoralis*, literally the Rule of the Shepherd, but it is also known in English by the titles, *Pastoral Care* and *Pastoral Rule*. We will use the title *Pastoral Rule*. Alfred was very fond of this book, and he translated it, and added two prefaces to it.

Alfred’s translation of Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Rule* was probably one of the earliest translations undertaken by Alfred himself; the translation may date from about 890. The *Pastoral Rule* is concerned with the spiritual and intellectual qualities necessary in a person responsible for the government of others. Gregory’s text was principally directed to the holders of ecclesiastical office, but his words are frequently couched in terms that would be equally applicable to the holders of secular office. One may see at once why the work had such an appeal for Alfred, and why he undertook to make its lessons available to the Bishops of his realm.

The reading that we shall hear first is from the *Metrical Preface* to the *Pastoral Rule* written as the title indicates, in poetic metre. *The Metrical Preface* is followed by a *Prose Preface*, which Alfred dedicated to his friend Werferth, Bishop of Worcester.

But, first, the *Metrical Preface*. Alfred explains how St Augustine of Canterbury brought the message of Pope Gregory from Rome to England’s shores; then with a rather interesting device, Alfred allows the translation itself to take over and describe why the Rule was brought to England, translated, and then disseminated. The translation also makes the point that it needs to be heard in Old English, because some of the English bishops did not understand Latin.

The Metrical Preface to Gregory’s Pastoral Rule

Augustine brought this message from the south
over the salt seas, to the island dwellers,
as the Lord’s general, the Pope of Rome,
had earlier composed it. Wise in heart,

Gregory studied many sacred writings:
a hoard of learning through the spirit’s wisdom.

Thereby, he most of all won over men
to heaven’s guardian, that best of Romans,
of all mankind the richest in his Spirit,
most famous for his greatness. Afterwards
Alfred translated every word of me
into the English Tongue, and south and north,
despatched me to his scribes and ordered them
to make more copies from me, so that he
could send them to his bishops, because some
of them who knew least Latin, needed it.

So having heard the *Metrical Preface*, we come to the *Prose Preface*. This *Prose Preface* is a very important document in our understanding of King Alfred and of the literary culture of late Anglo-Saxon times.. Alfred writes the *Prose Preface* to his friend in Worcester, Bishop Werferth. Werferth who died in 915, “was one of the little band of scholars whom King Alfred gathered round him, and to whom England owed the preservation of letters in the dark years of the Danish invasion.”

But just before the *Prose Preface*, let us reflect a moment on the way in which one of the contemporary icons of learning in this city, the University, founded in the 1840’s, and then named King Alfred’s College, rises out of the same tradition of learning that Alfred was so eager to advance.

King Alfred sends words of greeting lovingly and amicably...

To My dear Bishop Werferth,

... I would have it known that very often it has come to my mind what people of learning there were formerly throughout England, both in religious and secular orders; and how they were happy times then throughout England; and how the kings, who had authority over this people, obeyed God and his messengers; and how they not only maintained their peace, morality, and authority at home, but also extended their territory outside; and how they succeeded both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how eager were the religious orders both in teaching and in learning, as well as in all the holy services which it was their duty to perform for God. And how people from abroad sought wisdom and instruction in this country, and how in these days, if we wish to acquire these things, we would have to seek them outside this country.

Learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few people who could understand the divine services. Thanks be to God Almighty that we now have any supply of teachers at all! Therefore, my dear Bishop Werferth, I beseech you to do as I believe you are willing to do; which is as often as you can, free

yourself from worldly affairs, so you may apply that wisdom, which God gave you, wherever you can.

Remember what punishments befell us in the world when we neither cherished learning, nor transmitted it to others. We were Christians in name alone, and very few of us possessed Christian virtues. When I reflect on all this, I recollect how – before everything was ransacked and burnt – the churches throughout England stood filled with treasures and with books. Similarly there was a great multitude of those serving God; and they derived very little benefit from those books, because they couldn't understand anything of them, since they weren't written in their own language. It's as if they had said: our ancestors, who formerly maintained these places, loved wisdom and through it obtained wealth and passed it on to us. Here one can still see their track, but we cannot follow it. Therefore we have now lost the wealth, as well as the wisdom, because we did not want to set our minds to the task.

When I reflected on all this, I wondered exceedingly why the good, wise people who were formerly found throughout England and had thoroughly studied all those books, didn't want to translate any of them into their own language. But I immediately answered myself, and said: “They did not think that people would ever become so careless, and that learning would decay like this. They refrained from doing it through this resolve, namely they wished that the more languages we knew, the greater would be the wisdom in this land.’

When I recalled how knowledge of Latin had previously decayed throughout England, and yet many could read things written in English, I then began, amongst the various and multifarious afflictions of this kingdom, to translate into English the book which in Latin is called *Pastoralis*, in English *The Rule of the Shepherd*. Sometimes I translated the *Pastoral Rule*, word for word, sometimes sense for sense, as I learnt it from Plegmund my Archbishop, and from Asser my Bishop, and from Grimbald my mass-priest; and I intend to send a copy to each bishopric in my Kingdom.

*A footnote to this piece which has so commended the need for wisdom and learning in the kingdom, is a fascinating one and concerns that most precious of Anglo-Saxon ornaments, **The Alfred Jewel**, now kept in the Ashmolean museum in Oxford. Various suggestions to explain the original function of the Alfred Jewel have been put forward, ranging from the head of a dress-pin to the central jewel in a crown. The most popular theory depends on the exact meaning of the anglo-saxon word 'aestel', which is uncertain, but both context and etymology suggest 'book-marker'; it was obviously something closely associated with a book, and probably derives from the latin (h)astula, 'small spear' or 'splinter'. An aestel would thus seem to be a rod-like pointer perhaps used for following the line while reading; but since each*

aestel sent out by Alfred is said to have been worth a great deal of money, one has to suppose that each was expensive to make and so was associated physically with a valuable jewel or piece of gold ornament.

So continuing with the letter, Alfred concludes with the gifts of the book-markers, and adds to his letter these words: “furthermore, in each copy there will be an *aestel* worth fifty mancuses. And in God’s name I command that no one shall take that *aestel* from the book, nor the book from the church. It isn’t known how long there will be such learned bishops as, thanks be to God, there are now nearly everywhere. Therefore I would wish that they [the book and the *aestel*] always remain in place, unless the bishop wishes to have the book with him, or if it is on special loan somewhere, or someone is copying it.”

MUSIC: Sanctus

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus

Holy, holy, holy,

Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

Lord God of Sabaoth.

Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.

Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.

Hosanna in excelsis.

Hosanna in the highest.

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in excelsis.

Hosanna in the highest.

MUSIC: Acclamatio post elevationem

Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem.

Merciful Jesus, grant them rest.

Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem.

Merciful Jesus, grant them rest.

Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem sempiternam.

Merciful Jesus, grant them eternal rest.

Amen.

Amen.

Part 2

The Reading of the Psalms

King Alfred was a layman of exceptional religious devotion. He was in the invariable habit of listening daily to divine services and Mass, and of participating in the saying and singing of psalms and prayers and in the day-time and night-time offices. Given that the offices consisted largely of psalms, Alfred cannot but have been familiar with the Psalter, the book of Psalms. Many psalms represent King David’s anguished outpourings to God for help against his foreign enemies, and for sustenance in his pursuit of divine knowledge. Alfred will have been struck by similarities between King David’s situation and his own, and it is not misleading to regard Alfred’s translation of the Psalter as an act of personal devotion. Before the psalm you are about to hear, there is a short preamble from Alfred describing the context out of which he made his translation.

Alfred: “The text of Psalm 2 is called ‘David’s Psalm’ in English. It is so called because David in this psalm lamented and complained to the Lord about his enemies, both native and foreign, and about all his troubles.” (So we can see that Alfred read and understood the psalms in general, and this particular psalm, to be echoing his own thoughts, his own hopes and fears. “Hear now you kings, and learn...embrace learning lest you stray from the straight path.”

1. Why do all nations rage, *and why do they contemplate useless undertakings?*
2. And why do the kings of the earth rise up, and noblemen come together against God, *and against him whom he chose as lord and anointed?*
3. ‘Let us break their bonds, *and cast away their yoke from us.*’
4. ‘What avails their talk?’ said the prophet, ‘though they speak in this manner? *For God who is in heaven derides them, and the Lord confounds them.*
5. And he calls out to them in His anger, *and confuses their schemes.*’
6. And I nevertheless am placed by God as king, over His holy Mount Sion, *for the purpose of teaching His will and His law.*
7. For the Lord said to me: ‘*You are my son – I begot you this very day.*’
8. Ask me, and I shall deliver the enemy peoples for your inheritance, *and I shall extend your authority over their boundaries.*
9. And I shall bring it about that you rule them with an iron rod; *and I can destroy them as easily as the potter can a pot.*
10. Hear now, you kings, and learn, *you judges who judge over the earth:*
11. Serve the Lord and fear Him: *rejoice in God, yet with awe.*
12. Embrace learning, lest you incur God’s anger *and lest you stray from the right path.*
13. For when His anger is kindled, *then blessed are those who now trust in him.*

Alfred’s understanding of the New Testament as well as of the Old Testament comes out in the following section about Christ’s leadership, a matter Alfred was deeply interested in, as he looked to Christ for wisdom, and on matters of leadership. Alfred wrote, “The mediator himself of God and men, that is Christ, avoided undertaking earthly rule – Christ himself, who surpasses all wisdom of the higher spirits and ruled in heaven before the world was created! It is written in the Gospel that the Jews came and wished to make him King by force. When the Saviour realised that, He avoided them and hid himself. Who could more easily rule men without fault than he who created them? He did not avoid authority because anyone else was more worthy, but rather He wished to set us an example, so that we are not too greedy for it; and also He wished to suffer for us. He did not wish to be King, and he came of his own will to the cross.

Following this Psalm, here is a meditation on God, written by the 5th century philosopher, Boethius, which Alfred translated into English.

“It is not in vain that we trust in God, because he is not changeable as we are. Rather, pray to him meekly, because he is very generous and very merciful. Lift up your hearts to him with your hands, and pray for what is just and what is necessary, because he will not reject you. Scorn evil and flee from it as quickly as you can; love the virtues and follow them. You have a very great need to act well, because what you do you do always in the presence of the Eternal and Almighty God: he sees it all and with grace, he returns it all.”

Just before the concluding prayer, which is Alfred’s own, a few more words about Alfred the Christian. It seems that Alfred’s Christian commitment entered into every aspect of his life. He sought to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with his God. Yet of all the aspects of Alfred, the one most deeply penetrating into his way of being, trusting and praying, was his desire to learn. His learning was indispensable to his teaching, and his teaching, often dependent on the fertile minds of others. His humility to sit at the feet of Pope Gregory, Bishop Swithun, Boethius, and the Venerable Bede among many others, is a sure sign of a good teacher. For a good teacher is also a good learner. But it is the strictly intellectual side of Alfred’s character which is most specially his own. We seem to hear echoes of the very first talk where his eagerness outran his modesty “will you really give this book to the one who can understand it the soonest?” Any other king would have thought it enough to defend his people with courage, to rule them with justice, to legislate for them with wisdom. Alfred did all this and more also. He made it his business to be the spiritual and intellectual teacher of his people.

MUSIC: ‘Veni Creator Spiritus’

*Veni, Creator Spiritus,
mentes tuorum visita,
imple superna gratia,
quæ tu creasti, pectora.
Qui diceris Paraclitus,
donum Dei altissimi,
fons vivus, ignis, caritas
et spiritalis unctio.
Tu, septiformis munere,
dextræ Dei tu digitus,
Tu rite promissum Patris,
sermone ditans guttura.*

Come, Creator Spirit,
visit the minds of those who are yours;
fill with heavenly grace
the hearts that you have made.
You who are called the Paraclete,
gift of God most high,
spring of life, of fire, of love
and spiritual unction.
The mystic seven-fold gifts are Thine,
finger of God’s right hand divine.
The Father’s promise sent to teach,
the tongue a rich and heavenly speech.

Alfred's Prayer

Lord God Almighty, maker and ruler of all creatures,
I beseech you on behalf of your mighty mercy,
and through the sign of the Holy Cross,
and through St Mary's maidenhood,
and through St Michael's obedience,
and through the love and merits of all your saints,
that you guide me better than I have done towards you;
and direct me according to your will and my soul's need
better than I myself am able;
and strengthen my mind to your will
and to my soul's need;
and confirm me against the devil's temptations,
and keep far from me foul lust and all iniquity;
and protect me from my enemies visible and invisible;
and teach me to perform your will,
that I may inwardly love you before all things
with pure thought and clean body;
for you are my Creator and my Redeemer,
my sustenance, my consolation, my trust and my hope.
Praise and glory be to you now and forever,
world without end. Amen.

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