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ALFRED THE MAN

847 – 899

With all the other things going on with Hyde 900, why a series of talks on Alfred himself? I think the mainspring for this series came from being aware that Alfred was not just an historical icon of Englishness, but that he was also a spiritual man. Yet what sort of spiritual man was he? What refreshed his spiritual roots? What kept him a man of devotion in the midst of great responsibilities? How did he pray? What did he read? What standards did he demand for the kingdom and for himself? How, as we say these days, did he resource himself in the demanding role of leader and king? Questions, questions.

I wanted more than anything else to lay the ghost of all those early text books, and the line drawings of impossible-looking people, that were the staple diet of my childhood. I wanted to get inside the mind and soul of a man who could retire to seclusion in Athelney, as well as create a legal framework, which has given roots to our whole legal system. I wanted to see him with his crown off as well as with his crown on.

I inveigled some good friends to join me in the search and I am extremely grateful that they not only joined in with the enterprise but are reading alongside me today. The music that you will hear is, with the exception of the Gregorian chants in the final week, taken from the Winchester Troper. This music is one of the earliest settings of a sung eucharist, used here in Winchester, and is contemporary with Alfred.

But before the music, let us pray together the prayer that you will find on the sheet:

God, our maker and redeemer,
we pray you of your great mercy
and by the power of your holy cross
to guide us by your will
and to shield us from our foes;
that after the example of your servant Alfred,
we may inwardly love you above all things;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Music: Versus Ante Officium: Hodie cantandus est nobis Puer

Although Alfred has been given a very high status by our country, he was not a mythical god. He was a living human being, no doubt with faults and failings like any of us. So we are dealing over the next few weeks with a flesh and blood person with

many responsibilities in the shaping of the laws, the culture, the faith, and the direction of a kingdom, at a period when there were many competing demands on Alfred’s time and with the responsibilities he carried.

The sea defines a country as much as the land. This country has always been an island, in Latin ‘insula’, and that insularity gave Alfred, and us today, options to look out and to look in. The island defines the governance, and shapes the governors. However, Alfred’s legacy defies the term ‘insula’, because he was a man who absorbed and delighted in the literature of a wider and deeper culture than the British at the time could offer, and enjoyed the language that unlocked such internationalism of culture.

He was a holy man, who would have sought out a daily eucharist, read the scriptures imaginatively, said his prayers, sought forgiveness of his sins, and encouraged his clergy. The defining size of his statue in the Broadway says a lot for how the Victorians saw Alfred. These four glimpses into aspects of Alfred the Man, the King, the Christian thinker, and the Citizen who made his home in Winchester, and left his mark upon it, are, we hope, opportunities to come close to an icon that will not disappear, and nor do we want it to. Each of us in matters to do with Alfred will have our own area of particular interest. We hope that your area of interest will be covered in some way or other. But we begin with Alfred the man, the human being, living in a particular place at a particular time, seeing his life in very broad brushstrokes: first through the eyes and pen of his secretary, Asser.

Asser is important in the life of Alfred. He was Bishop of Sherborne and the author of the life of Alfred the Great. He died in 900, close in time to Alfred himself. Asser’s devotion to Alfred must have been great, because he agreed to spend six months of each year in Alfred’s household. His biography of Alfred begins like this:

I write this to my esteemed and most holy Lord Alfred, ruler of all the Christians of the Island of Britain, King of the Angles and Saxons, Asser, lowest of all the servants of God, wishes thousand-fold prosperity to his King in this life and in the next, according to the desires of his prayers.

There follow readings from Asser’s life of King Alfred.

In the year 849, Alfred King of the Anglo-Saxons was born, at the royal estate called Wantage, in the district known as Berkshire (which is so called from Berroc-wood, where the box trees grow very abundantly).

His genealogy is woven in this way: King Alfred was the son of King Aethulwulf ... Concerning his mother’s family, Alfred’s mother was called Osburh, a most religious woman, noble in character, and noble by birth. She was the daughter of Oslac ...

I think now that I should turn to that which particularly inspired me to this work: in other words I consider that some small account of the infancy and boyhood of my

esteemed Lord Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons, should briefly be inserted at this point.

From the cradle onwards, in spite of all the demands of this present life, it has been the desire for wisdom more than anything else, together with the nobility of his birth, which have characterised the nature of Alfred's noble mind ... He was a careful listener, by day and night, to English poems ... and he readily retained them in his memory...

One day, therefore, when his mother was showing him and his brothers a book of English poetry, which she held in her hand, she said: 'I shall give this book to whichever of you can learn it the fastest.' Spurred on by these words, or rather by divine inspiration, and attracted by the beauty of the initial letter in the book, Alfred spoke as follows to his mother, forestalling his brothers (ahead in years, though not in ability): 'Will you really give this book to the one who can understand it the soonest and recite it to you?' Whereupon, smiling with pleasure, she reassured him, saying: 'Yes, I will.' He immediately took the book from her hand, went to his teacher (St Swithun) and learnt it. When it was learnt, he took it back to his mother and recited it.

In 851, a great Viking army, with 350 ships, came into the mouth of the River Thames and ravaged Canterbury. They put to flight Berhtwulf, King of the Mercians, who with all his army had come to do battle with them ...

After these things had happened there, the Viking Army moved on to Surrey... Aethulwulf, King of the Saxons, fought for a very long time at the place called Oakfield and there, when battle had been waged fiercely and vigorously on both sides for a long time, a great part of the Viking horde was utterly destroyed and killed...

In 853 when Alfred was five, King Aethulwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome ... At this time the Lord Pope Leo was ruling the apostolic see ... He anointed the child Alfred as King, ordained him, received him as his adoptive son, and confirmed him. In the year 855 when Alfred was seven, Aethulwulf the esteemed King travelled to Rome in great state, taking his son Alfred with him for a second time on the same journey because he loved him more than his other sons; there he remained for a whole year...

In 860 when Alfred was twelve, a great Viking Army, arriving from the sea, aggressively attacked and laid waste the City of Winchester. When they were returning to the ships, with immense booty, Osric, alderman of Hampshire, with his men, and Alderman Aethulwulf with the men of Berkshire joined in earnest. The Vikings were cut down everywhere...

After this, Alfred learnt the ‘daily round’, that is, the services of the hours, and then certain psalms and many prayers; these he collected in a single book, which he kept by him day and night, as I have seen for myself; amid all the affairs of this present life he took it around with him everywhere for the sake of prayer, and was inseparable from it. But alas, he could not satisfy his craving for what he desired the most, namely the liberal arts; for, as he used to say, there were no good scholars in the entire kingdom of the West Saxons at this time. At times I copied into the same book no fewer than three other passages, pleasing to him just as I had foreseen. Thereafter during our daily discussions, while searching to this end, as we found equally pleasing passages the book grew full, and rightly so, just as it is written (by the great writer of Sherborne, St Aldhelm):

‘The just man builds on a modest foundation and gradually proceeds to greater things’, or like the busy bee, wandering far and wide over the marshes in his quest, eagerly and relentlessly assembles many various flowers of Holy Scripture, with which he crams full the cells of his heart.

In 871, when Alfred was 23, as soon as his brother Aethelred died, he took over the government of the whole Kingdom, with the approval of the divine will and according to the unanimous wish of all the inhabitants of the Kingdom ... He surpassed all his brothers both in wisdom and in all good habits, and in particular because he was a great warrior and victorious in virtually all battles.

Music: Kyrie

Part Two: Alfred, Athelney, and the Cakes

One of the most famous stories concerning Alfred is that of the burning of the cakes. It is amazing when a man is as famous and influential in the history of the country as Alfred was, that a few burnt cakes should be the one thing people remember. I wonder why that is so? It’s probably because we like to know about, not only the great side of people, but also the human side, the frail side, like us, and to know that they inhabit the same planet. So the cakes are important, even though as modern historians will be quick to point out, the story’s authenticity cannot be guaranteed.

However, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has this enlightening entry for the year 878 when Alfred and the army were in the area of Athelney in Somerset: “This year about mid-winter, after the twelfth night, the Danish army stole out to Chippenham, and rode over the land of the West-Saxons, where they settled, and drove many of the people over sea, and the rest, the greatest part, rode down, and subdued to their will; all but Alfred the King. He, with a little band, uneasily sought the woods and fastnesses of the moor.”

And there he seemed to be until Easter time, when, says the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle ... “King Alfred with his little force raised a work at Athelney, from which he assailed

the army, assisted by that part of Somersetshire which was nighest to it ... and there came out to meet him all the people of Somersetshire, and Wiltshire and that part of Hampshire which is on this side of the sea, and they rejoiced to see him.”

In that intermission between winter and Eastertide 878, it could well be that Alfred was waiting on the warmer weather to face down the Danes, and in that space had to find accommodation, and there wasn't much choice, and his experience of landladies was probably much like many people's to this day.

This version of the story is from the *Life of St Neot*, a 10th-century compilation from five separate manuscripts. One of the features of this particular version is the description of the fire or oven, on which the famous cakes were burnt. The author of the tale spices it up with classical references: the fire is divinised as *Vulcan*, husband of the sea-borne *Venus*.

There is a place in the remote parts of English Britain far to the west which in English is called Athelney, and which we refer to as 'Atheling's Isle'. It is surrounded on all sides by vast salt marshes and in the middle is sustained by some level ground. King Alfred happened unexpectedly to come there as a lone traveller. Noticing the cottage of a certain unknown swineherd, he directed his path towards it and sought there a peaceful retreat; he was given refuge, and he stayed there for a number of days, impoverished, subdued and content with the bare necessities. Reflecting patiently that these things had befallen him through God's just judgement, he remained there awaiting God's mercy through the intercession of his servant Neot; for he had conceived from Neot the hope that he nourished in his heart; 'whom the Lord loves', says the Apostle, he chastises; he scourges every son whom he adopts'. In addition to this, Alfred patiently kept the picture of Job's astonishing constancy before his eyes every day.

Now it happened one day, when the swineherd was leading his flock to their usual pastures, that the King remained alone at home with the swineherd's wife. The wife, concerned for her husband's return, had entrusted some kneaded flour to the husband of sea-borne Venus [Vulcan the fire God, that is, the oven]. As is the custom among countrywomen, she was intent upon other domestic occupations, until, when she sought the bread from Vulcan, she saw it burning from the other side of the room. She immediately grew angry and said to the King (unknown to her as such):

'Look here, man, you hesitate to turn the loaves which you see to be burning, yet you're quite happy to eat them when they come warm from the oven!'

But the King, reproached by these disparaging insults, ascribed them to his divine lot; somewhat shaken, and submitting to the woman's scolding, he not only turned the bread but even attended to it as she brought out the loaves when they were ready.

At some point in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, The Life of St Neot, which is preserved among a collection of sermons called Early English Homilies, carried the same story. The author departed from his source in many respects, and it is interesting to see how he recast the story of Alfred and the Cakes. Classical references are dropped, the wife becomes ‘evil’ in traditional fairy story style, and Alfred shows a great deal of humility in the face of aggravation.

“When King Alfred ... learned that the Viking army was so strong and so close to England, he immediately took to flight in terror and abandoned all his soldiers and his chieftains, and all his people, his treasures and treasure chests and looked to his own safety. He went in stealth along hedges and lanes, through woods and open fields, until through God’s guidance he arrived safe and sound at Athelney, and sought refuge in a swineherd’s house, and was willingly obedient to him and to his evil wife. Now it happened one day that the swineherd’s wife heated the oven, and the king sat beside it, warming himself by the fire, the household being unaware that he was a king. Then the evil wife suddenly became angry, and in a filthy temper said to the king: ‘Turn the loaves over so they don’t burn, because I see every day that you have a huge appetite.’ He immediately obeyed the evil wife, because perforce he had to. The good king called out to his Lord with great sorrow and lamentation, begging His mercy.”

Music: Sanctus

End

Music from *Christmas in Royal Anglo-Saxon Winchester: 10th-century Chant from the Winchester Troper*

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