SERMON PREACHED AT THE BANQUETING HOUSE, WHITEHALL
on Saturday 30 January 2010
by Dr Colin Podmore, Secretary of the House of Clergy of the General Synod

✠ *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.*

We meet on the site of an outrage. Scripture teaches, in the words of David to King Saul, that we should not 'stretch forth [our] hand' against a king who is 'the Lord's anointed' (1 Samuel 24. 6). But on this day in 1649, in this place, Bible-believing Protestants did exactly that. They put their anointed king to death.

Parliamentary rebellion had ended in a military coup. The King was tried under an invented law by an invented court. The Chief Justices would have nothing to do with such a travesty, so a junior provincial judge presided. In this show trial, refusal to plead was taken as an admission of guilt. A minimum of so-called 'evidence' was heard in closed session, without the defendant or any counsel for the defence. Verdict and sentence were openly pre-determined. Much that has been done by revolutionary and dictatorial regimes across the centuries, down to Hitler's People's Court and beyond, was foreshadowed if not invented here in Westminster, with Hugh Peters as the ranting ideologue, in a role that Dr Goebbels later made his own. Not an auspicious start for a brave new republican world.

But we are here not to excoriate the regicides (though a little righteous excoriation from time to time may be good for the soul). We are here to commemorate the Martyr. When the Prayer Book was restored in 1662, a Form of Prayer with Fasting was added for this day, 'Being [I quote] the Day of the Martyrdom of the Blessed King Charles the First'. The parish church built for the new town of Falmouth in my native Cornwall, consecrated in 1665, was dedicated to 'King Charles the Martyr' – as were five others. Thus the Church of England asserted her catholicity and marked herself out still further from the Protestant Reformation in other lands. She already celebrated the saints and martyrs of the pre-Reformation Church liturgically (how many Protestant churches did that?); now she added to the Calendar a martyr of her own.

Martyrs, of course, are recognized as such not for their lives or their piety (though King Charles' devotion and personal morality were exemplary) but because of their witness in death. It is not enough to be killed unjustly: the martyr must, like our blessed Lord, 'stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9. 51), go forth or stand firm knowing what the consequences might be. He must die an exemplary death: King Charles died with nobility and dignity, penitent for his sin, forgiving those responsible, praying in charity that they might repent and, echoing St Stephen, 'that this be not laid to their charge' (cf. Acts 7. 60). And above all, the Christian martyr must die not for some secular cause but as a witness to the Faith.

But for what did King Charles die? For what doctrine of the Faith was he a martyr? Those by whom he was, as the Prayer Book put it , 'barbarously… murdered' believed as he did in God the Father, in the divinity of Christ, in the Holy Spirit. He was put to death not by unbelievers, as were so many martyrs of past ages and indeed of our own day, but by fellow Christians. So in what respect was he a martyr? The answer is clear. He died for episcopacy, for the government of the Church by bishops, and for the Church of England so ordered. In his speech on the

scaffold he told them, 'You must give God His due by regulating rightly His Church (according to his scripture) which is now out of order'. By the reign of his father King James it was the established view within the Church of England that episcopacy was not a 'thing indifferent'. It was not a human institution, invented by men as a convenient way of organizing the Church. No, episcopacy was of divine institution. It was, as King James himself put it forty years before his son's death, 'the ordinance of God'.[1]

It has been fashionable in some quarters to downplay the religious nature of the English Civil War. Secular liberals can be reluctant to recognize the role of religion in the past as in the present. But in the 1640s the parties had names that reflected their religious allegiances. This was, to a significant extent, a struggle not just about religion in general but about ecclesiology in particular, between Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Independents (today we would call them Congregationalists). It was about how the Church should be governed. As his position weakened, the King was willing to negotiate and to compromise – even about episcopacy. It might be retained only in five dioceses, or suspended altogether for three years. Such concessions were perhaps not difficult to offer, given that in practice it had already been abolished, though doubtless some purists were critical. (They always are.) But King Charles would not contemplate abandoning episcopacy altogether. On that point he was absolutely intransigent. Had he been willing to give up the episcopal government of the Church of England, as his Queen among others urged, he might have saved the monarchy and saved his life, and he knew it. But he refused. He said that [I quote] 'conscience would not allow him to consent to the ruin of the religion he had sworn to maintain, and that he would rather lose his crown than his soul'. It was not just his coronation oath that held him back, but his belief in episcopacy. As he told his eldest son, 'the cheefest particular duty of a King is to maintain the true religion' and 'this duty can never be rightly performed without the Church be rightly governed'.

In declaring King Charles a martyr, the Church of England declared that episcopacy was not a 'second order issue' on which churches might legitimately differ. It was divinely instituted, the will of God for the ordering of his Church. Someone who died for episcopacy was a martyr who died for the Faith. Since the seventeenth century at least, it has been characteristic of Anglicans to emphasize that Faith and Order belong together. It will not do to uphold the Faith of the primitive Church, the Church of the Fathers and the earliest ecumenical Councils, while rejecting its episcopal Order. That is why in the twentieth century Anglicans were instrumental in founding the Faith and Order movement to hold those two things together, and have played a leading role in it ever since. In its Second Report on the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood back in 1988, the House of Bishops rejected the suggestion that the ordination of women to the priesthood was a second order issue, for two reasons. First, because it is 'closely bound up with what is believed about the nature of God, about Christ and about the Church and about creation' and thus 'intimately related to the "centre" of the faith'. And secondly, because 'questions of church order touch upon matters of faith'.[2] Faith and order belong together. A martyr for episcopacy is a martyr for the Faith.

Down the centuries, the sermons preached on this day have often been political and frequently concerned to uphold episcopacy. To honour that tradition I must therefore touch on current affairs. For today, as in the 1640s, some believe that episcopacy in the Church of England is under threat. Those who take that view affirm, with the Canons of the Church of England, that

‘every bishop’ is a ‘father in God’ (Canon C 18.1). They believe, with St Ignatius of Antioch, that a bishop is ‘a type of the Father’ (*To the Trallians*, 3) and they hold that women cannot be fathers or an image of the Father. If the Church of England ordains women to the episcopate without offering alternative episcopal provision, those who hold such views will have a very serious problem. It isn’t necessary to hold such views oneself in order to recognize that that is the case. If you do not believe that women can be bishops and your bishop is a woman, you have no bishop. Can one be an Episcopalian without a bishop?

That of course is precisely the dilemma that many faced after 1645 and still more after 1649. For most people then, Rome was not an option, and indeed King Charles was very clear in urging his own children not to become Roman Catholics. Today, of course, things are different. We live in an ecumenical age. Rome has changed out of all recognition, and much that the Reformation re-established is now universally accepted. This Society welcomes associate members from other churches, and in that it honours a king who belonged to one of the earliest of the interchurch families, which unite Canterbury with Rome through the sacrament of marriage.

Last autumn Pope Benedict published an Apostolic Constitution, making provision for Anglican ordinariates under the Holy See, in which ‘the liturgical, spiritual and pastoral traditions of the Anglican Communion’ will be maintained ‘as a precious gift… and a treasure to be shared’. That is a remarkable fruit of the ecumenical movement. Who would have thought a hundred years ago that a Pope would speak so warmly of our tradition, embodied I suppose above all in the Book of Common Prayer and in the incomparable liturgy we are celebrating today? (Could devotion to King Charles, the Martyr who died for Anglicanism, even find its place in the ordinariates, I wonder? Given Pope Benedict’s generosity, I wouldn’t be surprised.) To be frank, not all Anglicans are as positive as the Pope is about our Anglican liturgical tradition; perhaps his Apostolic Constitution may encourage them to rediscover and re-appropriate it. The Holy Father has shown pastoral concern, generosity of spirit, openness to diversity and an ability to be innovative in developing existing ecclesiology and structures in order to meet real pastoral need. Many will see those, ironically, as very Anglican virtues.

But the Vatican is clear that it is only ‘elements’ of the ‘Anglican patrimony’ that are to be preserved. Not all of the Anglican patrimony is portable, and those entering an ordinariate will have to leave some very important parts of it behind – for example, the relationship between Church and community, Church and nation, throne and altar which is so integral to our celebration today. So for many these ordinariates can either only be a last resort or they can be no resort at all.

Many hope that pastoral concern and inventiveness, proper compromise and generosity of spirit may yet prevail. But if they do not, what then? Rome may be one option, but it was not the one that most of our seventeenth-century forbears took. Many remained faithful to their Anglican tradition and its liturgy as best they could, conforming outwardly as far as they must, but hoping for a better day. During the Commonwealth a new church designed for Anglican worship was built at Staunton Harold in Leicestershire. As an inscription records, ‘When all things sacred were throughout ye nation demollisht or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley Barronet founded this Church Whose singular praise it is to have done ye best things in ye worst times And hoped them

in the most callamitous.’ His hopes were not vain, for eventually the monarchy was restored and the Church of England and episcopacy with it.

It was a close-run thing. By 1660 there were only nine English bishops still alive; had the interregnum lasted ten years longer, the Anglican succession might have died out. But as it was, Bishop Juxon, who attended the Martyr at his death, lived to become Archbishop of Canterbury and restore the Book of Common Prayer. What was it that inspired people to keep the faith? What was it that kept them loyal to the Church of England despite its abolition, and determined to restore it? One very important element, I would suggest, was the memory of Charles I and what he had stood for, kept alive in the *Eikon Basilike*. Another was the very fact of his martyrdom. King Charles gave the Anglican tradition, just a hundred years old when he died, its first martyr. One reason why people remained faithful to the Church of England in their hearts was that a king thought it was worth dying for.

History rarely repeats itself exactly. In every age circumstances are different. But let us pray that we may all follow the example of Blessed King Charles. He was willing to negotiate and to compromise for the sake of peace, yet he also was clear in identifying those principles that cannot be compromised. In the coming years people will take a variety of decisions, but let us pray that our Martyr’s example will encourage us all to witness to Christ by being charitable one to another and by accepting what happens with dignity, whatever it may be. History may not repeat itself, but we can learn from it. One thing it does teach us, through the death and resurrection of the Church of England and episcopacy 350 years ago, is that we cannot predict the future, and that should encourage us all to live in hope. It is God’s future and his Church – not ours.

And now to that same God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion and power, henceforth and for evermore. Amen.

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[1] P. E. More and F. L. Cross, *Anglicanism: The Thought and Practice of the Church of England, illustrated from the Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1951), p. 6.
[2] *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Second Report by the House of Bishops* (GS 829, 1988), pp. 15-16: para. 33.