

Chevin sermon

Preached at the Civic Service, 29.1.12

Richard Chevin burgess and baker, by his will dated the 20th of June this year [1589], devised to the mayor, bailiffs, and burgesses, and their successors for ever, the house he then dwelt in (formerly Clement Hostel) (upon condition that they paid 40s. a year to his sister Mary Scott, for her life, and to the poor of the town 5s. yearly, and after his sister's death 6s. Yearly). And he willed that the mayor and three of the ancient aldermen should see this money given to the poor people having most need, twice in the year, viz. the Sunday before St. Michael's day, and the Sunday before Candlemas day; and that the mayor should appoint one honest man to preach in the church where the mayor inhabited, and to be done at one o'clock afternoon, and to have for his pains, 3s. 4d.

Sad to say, they tell me that the money has run out, so there is no distribution to the poor and no payment to the preacher. It is however the Sunday before Candlemas day, it is the church where the mayor is inhabited, but it is not one o'clock in the afternoon and whether the preacher that has been called upon is an honest man or not I'll leave you to judge. But I assure you that there is no money left for him either.

Richard Chevin was not a native of this village but he held a long lease from the lord of the manor of the land around the windmill in Chesterton and bequeathed the income of that to the Spital-house, or hospital, in Cambridge.

Eight years earlier, in 1581, the vice-chancellor of the university was a man called Andrew Perne, a graduate of St John's College who became Master of Peterhouse and Dean of Ely. His life spanned the turbulent reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth. It was said of him that, like the vicar of Bray, he was faithful to the national religion, whatever it might be.

But of interest to us today is an account he wrote of an incident that happened in Chesterton two years before, in 1579.

Thomas Parishe being head constable dwelling at Chesterton, when ther was a match made betwixt certain Schollers of Cambridge and divers of Chesterton ; to play at fote ball, abowt twoe yeres past, the sayd schollers resorting thither peaceably withowte anye weapons, the sayd townsmen of Chesterton had layd divers staves secretly in the church porch of Chesterton, and in playing did pike quarrells agenst the Schollers, & did bringe owte there staves wherewith they did so beat the schollers that divers had there heads broken, divers being otherwise greatly beaten, wear driven to runne throughe the river, divers did crye to Parise the constable to keep the Queene's peace, who then being a player at the foote ball with the rest did turne to the Schollers, willing them to keep the Queene's peace, and turning himself to the townsmen of Chesterton, willed them to beat the Schollers downe, as yt was reported to my Lord Cheef Justice of England, and Mr. Attorney, and the rest of the Justices of the universitie, for the which the sayd Parise being heade constable was put into the Castle, by my Lord cheef Justice & all the rest of the Justices, amonge whome I did then sitt...

This was part of a running battle – and it was a battle – between our ancient village and the more recently established university who claimed jurisdiction over both town and gown. There were similar incidents, some involving parish's brother, Richard, that were even more unsavoury than the one I've recounted, usually involving Parish's brother, Richard, who it is not hard to see was, I am

afraid, something of a thug and hooligan. The legal question of jurisdiction was eventually resolved – entirely in the university's favour – 35 years later by a ruling of the privy council.

Thomas Parish was one of the constables appointed as officers here by the vestry meeting, the body presided over by the vicar and churchwardens and that effectively ran the affairs of the village, both civil and ecclesiastical. He and generations of his family are buried in the churchyard. Parish was his name, a parish was where he lived. The term was introduced into England by the 7th century Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus. The paroikia in the early church was the community of Christians that gathered together in someone's oikia, household, and that saw themselves as the household of faith. Their father-figure, in early days the bishop, as the church grew became the parish priest. It was a previous native of Tarsus, St Paul, who had appropriated the metaphor of the body – it had been used in a secular context of the body politic, the community of citizens working together for the common good. The imperialisation of Rome and its empire reduced the role of every member (and, indeed, every member did not include significant groups such as slaves and women). St Paul renewed the vision.

'For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually are members one of another.' (Romans 12.4-5)

Early English towns also had a sense of being the body politic – their affairs were governed by the town moot where the common law was established. But with the rise of feudalism, power became concentrated in the hands of the few. Theodore's new system, however, allowed the church to give back to the world at large the idea of the body and all being members one of another. The English parish developed with a parish priest, a father figure, often the best educated one in the community. An annual open vestry meeting would elect parish officers, which included for many centuries, constables such as Thomas Parish, and for even more centuries Churchwardens, the leading lay members of the community. Nowadays their responsibilities are strictly ecclesiastical but they had a much broader civic role right into the second half of the 19th century.

Many churchwardens' accounts and records still exist. Historically they were kept in a chest in the vestry, where their meetings were held. Like most parishes, ours are now stored in the county record office. We don't have a complete set of records but some survive from the period from 1585-1595, that is during the period when the town was in dispute with university. There are the payments you might expect for churches: church repairs especially for glaziers (nothing much changes: we are in the throes of paying about £25,000 for our window repairs); repair of bells; strewing church in spring and before Christmas; washing church linen; bread and wine for Communion (which had ceased to be celebrated every week but only on Waster Day, New Year's Day, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Easter Day, Easter Monday, Low Sunday, Whitsunday, St Luke's Day, All Saints' Day and Purification). But there was also relief of soldiers and the poor (a responsibility that belonged to the vestry until the late 19th century, including the setting of a poor rate). They also received rents for the town lands and for the use of the Town's bull – which belonged to the church (an interesting example of the church serving the community).

Throughout the second half of the 19th century Chesterton resisted attempts by Cambridge to swallow us up and the parish vestry continued manfully to run the affairs of the parish, including the great expansion to the west called 'New Chesterton' with its new parish church, St Luke's. As well as

keeping the fire engine, the stocks, the poor houses, the maintenance of the highways was becoming an increasing burden and the straw that broke the camel's back was the whole issue of drains and sewers. A separate local board was appointed to deal with these but eventually Cambridge's expanding ambitions won the day and in 1912 we were absorbed into the borough council along with Grantchester, Trumpington and Cherry Hinton. Your vicar and churchwardens did not remain idle however; their interests had already moved from sewers to schools and the first St Andrew's School had been founded in 1844.

Churchwardens also made their contribution to their neighbouring borough. Thomas Naylor, a distinguished barrister, not only served this community, overseeing the much-needed restoration of both this parish church and also Chesterton Hall, was mayor twice in the 1870s. Edward Bell, the corn merchant of Peas Hill and brother of the Alice who gave her name to Alice Springs in Australia, lived in the manor house and was mayor in the 1880s and the only mayor recorded as having died in office. His funeral was held here on 25 March 1889. Four or five thousand people lined the streets and the churchyard for the procession whilst the shutters of businesses were put up and blinds in houses were drawn.

Since being absorbed by the borough in 1912 Chesterton has provided six mayors.

In the 1920s: Benjamin Jolley, a prominent Methodist who lived at Meadowcroft, the house that used to stand at the end of my road; George Lavender who ran a draper's business on the corner of King's Parade and Bene't St, who lived at 84 Chesterton Road and was a Sunday School teacher for 54 years.

In the 1950s: Henry Langdon after whom the care home in Union Lane is named.

In the 1970s: Don MacKay of Roebuck House and of the business that bears his name – still with us.

And now Ian Nimmo-Smith's name is added to that last.

We in Chesterton have a history of asserting our independence – and not always a proud one. But we have also long played our part in the wellbeing of our city and are proud to do so.

And that is true also of the church. The emergence of national, governmental provision for both welfare and education in the 20th century has to a certain extent marginalised the church in its historic role in these areas. But in response we should not – and I trust we do not – retreat into a religious ghetto. The church has had to learn to be a paroikia again. In New Testament times paroikia meant 'the stay or sojourn of those who are not citizens in a strange place'. The Hebrews in the Old Testament were called paroikoi, strangers who lived alongside the citizens of the land, travellers, semi-nomads, who had their own culture and calling, their own Law and their own destiny to be a holy people. So too the church was called to be a parochial people, custodians of a Scriptural tradition that taught them a better way of living and loving.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.'

We at St Andrew's in our day – vicar, churchwardens and all of us – are committed not only to fostering that Christian life and calling amongst us but also to active co-operation with all others to seek the welfare of both this parish and also the wider city. We work with community and user groups in providing a community hall and actively seek to find ways of extending hospitality to strangers and helping strangers to become friends. We have served the community by providing hospitality in our church newsletter, the Chesterton Chimes, so that different community groups can advertise what they do. We have gone a step further. We are voluntarily laying down our position of running the newsletter so that we can work together with others through a community newsletter. We do not seek to run the parish but to be a parish, a Christian community running alongside in parallel with others who seek the common good. Similarly we have played a key part in the coming to be and the organisation of the Chesterton Festival, an annual coming together and celebration of belonging in this part of Cambridge.

As a church building we play our part. We keep the doors open; we are visited by young and old; believer, half-believer, non-believer; those seeking shelter from the rain, or seeking refuge from a turbulent life situation or seeking help for a loved one who is dying. We seek to keep the doors open to all – and gladly do so, for our vocation is not to exist for ourselves but for others and the good of all.