

CHRISTMAS DAY 2019
St George's Chapel Windsor Castle

**Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year,
What 'tis to be a man.**

The words come from a poem written by Charles Kingsley in 1868.

**Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year,
What 'tis to be a man.**

Charles Kingsley's name has been mentioned in this Chapel two or three times in the course of this year; the year that has marked the 200th anniversary of his birth in 1819. Kingsley, as you probably know, was the author of such books as 'The Water Babies', 'Hereward the Wake' and 'Westward Ho!'. For many years, he was a country parson, the Rector of Eversley in Hampshire. In addition to this responsibility, he held, at different times, senior ecclesiastical and academic posts. He was a founding member of the movement known as 'Christian Socialism'. And he wrote a lot of poems.

From his poem **Christmas Day** I have selected the few words with which I began this sermon:

**Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year,
What 'tis to be a man.**

Only nine years before Kingsley wrote this poem, Charles Darwin's **Origin of Species** had been published, and there had been quite a bit of controversy, especially in religious circles, about the Theory of Evolution. Kingsley had embraced that theory from the start, and saw it as being in no way incompatible with belief in the Creator God. But, though he was accepting of what might be called our 'animal origins', he seems to have been more interested in what it is that makes us rise above them; in what makes human beings genuinely human. The poem **Christmas Day** has that concern at its heart.

**Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year,
What 'tis to be a man.**

In the first lines of the poem, Kingsley's imagination roves over the whole world, different people, different places and different climates, remembering that around the globe Christmas Day is cherished and celebrated by those who, recalling their childhood innocence, turn once again:

In awe and joy to listen to the tale
Of God made man, and in a manger laid.

And the poet reflects upon the possibility that their paying attention to the Christmas story:

May soften, purify, and raise the soul
From selfish cares.....
Toward the eternal facts.

He could be talking about us. We too, no doubt remembering our childhood innocence, come to church on Christmas Day "...to listen to the tale / Of God made man, and in a manger laid" hoping perhaps that our doing so:

May soften, purify, and raise the soul
From selfish cares.....
Towards the eternal facts.

Charles Kingsley is painfully aware of what he calls "that ignobler self"; that part of us that is always dragged down by the lower brutish instincts, and makes us somehow less than human. We too are aware of those retrogressive, downward-dragging forces in our own lives; all that selfishness and greed and aggression; all that 'being driven' by blind and uncontrolled lust for wealth, power and position, that leaves us, in the end, pitifully dissatisfied, and feeling most surely less than human and humane. But Kingsley writes of One:

Who taught mankind on that first Christmas Day,
What t'was to be a man; to give, not take;
To serve, not rule; to nourish, not devour;
To help, not crush; if need, to die, not live.

As we look upon the scene at Bethlehem, we witness the birth of one who was to show us what it is to be truly and uniquely 'human'

As often as not, when we come to church on Christmas Day, we come harbouring the hope that we might be moved in such a way as to be released from the grip of worldly care. And, to be sure, as we reflect upon the one whom the Babe of Bethlehem was later to become, we hear his call to us, sense his lure. How we wish, on Christmas Day, that we could be more like Jesus Christ in whom we catch sight of what it means to be genuinely and freely human.

**Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year,
What 'tis to be a man.**

Sadly, however, it never seems enough. Though we admire Jesus, even know him to express the human nature that we should love to be our own, our hearts somehow remain too hard for us to change. We need something more that:

May soften, purify, and raise the soul
From selfish cares.....
Towards the eternal facts.

To find that 'something more' we must adventure just a little further into the mystery of Christmas.

If the life of Jesus really is the truly human life, human life as it was ever meant to be, then, so our tradition teaches us, Jesus (like Adam in the story of Creation) is God's very image; the one through whom the nature of the Creator God is shown to us; revealed.

And if the fully human life of Jesus Christ (beginning at his birth in Bethlehem) is in fact, from first to last, a life of self-forgetful love, then we can believe that, since Jesus is a window onto God, God Himself is Self-Forgetful Love.

Moreover, as we adventure just one step more into the mystery of Christmas, we may see with the eyes of faith that it is as though that God of Self-Forgetful Love has, in Jesus Christ, actually come among us to assure us that there is nothing in this or any other world that is beyond His reach or that can separate us from His love. The **Blest day, which aye reminds us, year by year, / What 'tis to be a man**, at the same time serves to open our eyes to perceive God's eternal commitment to us.

Such belief, such insight and understanding, gives us that 'something more' that has the power to move us, to soften our hard hearts, and to impart a kind of grace to make change possible; to release us, the more that we embrace it, into our full humanity.

Let me finish by reading a few of the final lines of Charles Kingsley's poem.

O blessed day, which givest the eternal lie
To self, and sense, and all the brute within;
O come to us amid this war of life;
To hall and hovel come; to all who toil
In senate, shop or study; and to those

.....unmanned to brutes –
Come to them, blest and blessing Christmas Day.
Tell them once more the tale of Bethlehem;
The kneeling shepherds, and the Babe Divine;
And keep them men indeed, fair Christmas Day.

The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO, Dean of Windsor