

## Christ's College Cambridge – Commemoration of Benefactors – 30.11.18

1 Corinthians 12.4-11

This is an evening of beautiful coincidences which resonate through history.

In recent history, we are thankful for 40 years of Women at Christ's, and coincidentally overseen by our first female master.

In more ancient history, this evening we are thankful for over 500 years of Benefactors, and coincidentally presided over by the first female Bishop of Lancaster, coincidentally from the same House of Lancaster as our founder, Lady Margaret Beaufort.

Lady Margaret has always been close to my heart. On my first Sunday as an undergraduate here in 1990, I found myself nervously attending chapel. I remember we were pointed to the window above where Lady Margaret could oversee chapel. As a woman she wasn't permitted to attend Chapel in person. But as a woman of prayer, she took a keen interest in the spiritual heartbeat of Christ's College.

I love keeping up with the latest news from Christ's in the magazine, *Christ's Pieces*... I learnt you were having an art competition this term, where people were invited to depict Lady Margaret in one of her many significant roles, as one of the most influential woman of her generation.

I wonder if there was an entry depicting her as a woman of prayer? This is how I'd have drawn her – if I could have painted something for you.

This is the role she most longed for. Nearing the end of her life, in 1499, she took a vow of chastity before Archbishop Fisher and did what she always wanted to do – she devoted her time to prayer and study. And coincidentally, it was during this period in 1505 that she endowed a foundation God's House, refounding it as Christ's College.

I was very moved when I heard that our Master's husband Peter Cane, had adapted words from Lady Margaret's own translation of Thomas a Kempis, for our anthem in this evening's service:

*This day, good Lord, I offer unto Thee myself perpetually, For evermore to be Thy servant, With my heart and soul fully to continue. And I beseech Thee to inflame me with the burning fire of charity.*

I like to think these words are a window into Lady Margaret's heart and soul.

Her heart was broken at a very young age. As an important aristocratic pawn, age 13 she became a mother to her first and only son Henry. She was petite and too young to give birth and so this meant that her body was broken never recovered from this birth. But I would say her heart was broken by this birth too. Her son was taken from her to be made a ward of another aristocratic family because at age 13 she was widowed in early years of the Wars of the Roses. She therefore spent many lonely hours in prayer.

And by coincidence, this very same year, 1456, she heard stories of the Pope's pardon of Joan of Arc who had been burnt at the stake 25 years earlier as a teenage girl.

Joan was also a young woman who had visions that would change the course of a nation. Joan had been filled with a sense of righteous indignation that it was not right that there should be English soldiers on French soil. It seemed that the rulers of the day had quietly given up and resolved that there was "nothing that could be done". Joan rallied the troops,

influenced the French king and was burnt at the stake for her trouble as a witch. But 22 years after her death there was not a single English soldier left on French soil, the Hundred Years War was over.

And the Pope's pardon 25 years later meant her story became famed across Europe. Was it a coincidence that Lady Margaret found herself in a similar situation at a similar age to Joan of Arc, deeply conscious of the political turbulence of the Wars of the Roses, where many of the men who controlled her destiny had quietly given up and believed the lie that "nothing that could be done": Lancastrians would always be at odds with the House of York.

But I sense that in the deep prayer life of Lady Margaret, she also saw a vision of a land at peace. Was this when she started praying against the odds that her son might be the king who would unite England?

Earlier this month, I was moved by the number of people who were involved in church services to commemorate 100 years since the end of the First World War. I was in Lancaster for the lighting of one of the 1000 beacons of hope across the country.

By coincidence, exactly 100 days before the 1918 armistice, on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1918, the Queen's Grandfather, King George V called a National Day of Prayer for Peace.

A generation later, his son, King George VI was also to call a National Day of Prayer for the British Army trapped at Dunkirk. If you've seen the film *The Darkest Hour* you may appreciate that in May 1940 the war was not going well. On 26<sup>th</sup> May 1940, there were extraordinary scenes outside Westminster Abbey as people queued to pray.

Two events immediately followed. Firstly, a violent storm arose over the Dunkirk region grounding the Luftwaffe which had been killing thousands on the beaches. And then secondly, a great calm descended on the Channel, the like of which hadn't been seen for a generation, which allowed hundreds of tiny boats to sail across and rescue 335,000 soldiers, rather than the estimated 20-30,000. This was known as "*the miracle of Dunkirk*".

Archbishop William Temple who served during the Second World War, said this: "When I pray, coincidences happen, when I don't they don't."

I wonder if Joan of Arc's remarkable vision of praying for a change of wind direction over the nation of France, inspired the teenage Lady Margaret to also pray for a change in direction in the wind in the political turmoil of the Wars of the Roses? To pray and hope that one day her son would be king.

Our Foundation Documents suggest this is the case. I suspected this, so emailed to get a copy earlier this week – very promptly dug out of the archives. Very early on in the documents they refer to the College as a place of prayer, I quote:

"the weight falling on the shoulders of the late king was so alleviated by prayers and devotions when dealing with the great dangers confronting him and his country."

Today, surveys show that only 1 in 7 people would never resort to prayer; the younger you are, the more likely you are to pray and the more likely you are to believe in miracles.

I'm from Bolton, and you may recall the miracle at Bolton Wanderers back in 2012. Fabrice Muamba collapsed on the pitch from a heart attack. Even Adrian Childs on BBC Sport commented: "You could hear the whole stadium praying". Then, 78 minutes after his heart stopped, he literally came back to life. This should not have happened, he should have been brain dead. "I thank God that I am alive." he said.

Christ's College is a leading light in Cambridge University (I hadn't realised this when I applied... and unlike my husband, who earned two firsts in Maths and a starred first in theology, I confess I never earned my seat as a Scholar at do's like this – I had to wait till I studied theology at Oxford to achieve a first. I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions about the relative merits of the universities

But do not underestimate the influence and potential for hope that is contained in the lives in this chapel today.

But let's not just rely on our position of influence, on our raw talents and gifts. Lady Margaret didn't simply rely on her status. But in the secret place of prayer I sense she received a much bigger vision. She didn't capitulate to believe the lie that "there's nothing that can be done". But she prayed and saw the wind shift the destiny of nations. We so much need Lady Margarets in our generation with the political turmoil of today.

As our reading from *1 Corinthians* highlighted, the Spirit of God had incredible gifts to give us. They are there for the giving. Perhaps as you reflect on this passage one or two might resonate with you – why don't you ask for them? And may I suggest that Suggest that what is on your heart, deep down in the secret place, can be the whisperings of the Spirit of God, as you let him pray in you and work through you, I believe that this can shift the course of nations.

Finally, when I was invited to apply to be a bishop this time last year, I had to write a vision for the country - what was on my heart to see in the next five years. I thought I'd go big and write a 40 year vision.

.... In prayer the story that came to mind was scene at the Queen's Golden Jubilee Party in the Mall back in 2012. The London Symphony Orchestra struck up with *Land of Hope and Glory*. Something resonated deep in my spirit with those words.

In 40 years' time, may this country be a land of Hope not fear

And may our country be a land of Glory – in the sense of heaven come to earth: unity not division, peace not war, joy not despair, love not hatred and in place of death - life in all its fullness

May this College be a place that inspires men and women of influence to take time in prayer, to take time in the secret place, to take time to draw on the gifts of the Spirit of God.

And may you know with confidence, that when you pray, coincidences happen and that you'll find there's a wind who can change the direction of nations.

**LET'S PRAY**