

Gone but not forgotten

On the last Thursday in September the Royal Grammar School holds its annual Commemoration Service in Holy Trinity Church. The school does this sort of occasion very well: the choir is wonderful, the ceremony is dignified, and the singing of 600 boys is awesome. I wonder what the service means to the boys, beyond being the day when they are given half a day off school. I guess that it will become the sort of memory that is important in hindsight; it becomes a peg on which to hang memories of friendship, of adolescent struggles overcome, of hatred of school discipline, and, most probably, of a time when each boy felt that he is an important part of a greater whole. Not surprisingly, I have married Grammar School boys who have insisted on singing "To be a pilgrim" at their wedding – this being the school hymn.

The first reading is always taken from the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus 44.1-15. This book, not being part of the canon of scripture accepted by Protestants, is nevertheless included in many versions now, and is sometimes known as The Book of Sirach. The protestants at the time of the Reformation did not reject the books in the apocrypha; they did however see them as of lesser importance, less central and, maybe, less reliable for doctrine. The latter point is somewhat ironic for the ideal protestant position was that all doctrine is based on scripture: yet that doctrine is itself not based on scripture. So the early reformers had to some extent decided in advance what they regarded as true doctrine and then wanted only to include the books in Bible that gave a firm foundation for this doctrine. Some of the apocrypha was used by Roman Catholics to justify Purgatory – a notion hated by reformers. So (and with other reasons as well) the apocrypha was demoted to a far lower status in terms of divine inspiration.

Nevertheless, Ecclesiasticus 44.1-15 is a fine passage to read at this sort of occasion, beginning with the well-known line "Let us now praise famous men". The exclusive note (why only praise famous *men*?) jars today – even in a boys' public school (not least because the RGS has many fine female members of staff and governors, and Lanesborough has a superb (largely female) head and staff room). I would like the line to be changed, but there is merit in being aware that the Bible is rooted in times and attitudes different from our own. We can sanitise the Bible by changing a few verses so that they sound better to modern ears; but the danger would be that we could be less ready to challenge the Bible on some of the texts that truly are horrendous (yet sound OK on grounds of, say, inclusivity). LP Hartley's line "The past is a foreign country" is as true of the Bible. "The Bible is a foreign country; they do things differently there" is not a saying that undermines the value of the Bible. But it does encourage us to be careful in our search for God's wisdom, and not to be too naïve.

So Ecclesiasticus urges us to praise those famous people who have gone before us, not because they are famous but because (and this is what is named in the following verses), they ruled well, they were courageous, they offered intelligent counsel or they wrote profound poetry. On and on the prophet goes, naming the sort of activities that we should honour: leading, playing music, advising, living peacefully.

But half way through the passage we come to the verse that gives me goosebumps: "but of others there is no memory, they have perished as though they had never existed". That is so realistic,

especially in this age of 5-minute media attention. Who knows what it will take today to be remembered in 100 years' time? Those who appear most famous today are likely to be forgotten within two generations. And yet... the prophet says, there are those who never had a well-known name in their day and are forgotten now; *and yet* these people are the ones who laid the foundations for our godly living in the future by living godly lives in their own day: by being honest, kind, generous, forgiving and righteous. If you want to have a lasting effect in the world, live peaceably and well today and, though no-one may know you 20 years after you have died, you are a foundation for God's future.

I reckon these verses are expressing the same sort of sentiment that we hear in Hebrews Chapters 11 and 12. Hebrews 11 reminds us of the great heroes of our faith: Abraham, Moses, David, Gideon and many more. Hebrews 12 reminds us "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" we should not lose heart amidst the difficulties or troubles of our day. But, in between these great ideas, just at the end of Hebrews 11, we hear a quiet voice that reminds us that many heroes are "gone, departed, unnamed but their continuing influence is immense". Nearly all the great women of faith remain unnamed, but they too provide the foundation of faithful living today.

So "let us now praise our famous forebears" – let us also remember those who silently bore witness to the holiness and presence of God in our midst. And let us follow in their footsteps, confident that nothing and nobody who is precious will ever be forgotten or lost to God.