

St Michael's, Cornhill, 13th Jan 2012

OUR village's medieval church in Herefordshire is a smaller affair than this magnificent building. Thirteen souls we were last weekend, plus my darling wife in the organ loft. She plays a cracking hymn, Mrs Letts, though you need a good set of lungs to keep up with her. During a verse of the Te Deum recently I swear she lapped us.

Anyway, there we sat on Sunday, all thirteen, and the second lesson was from St Mark, who writes with Fleet Street immediacy. His Gospel opens with a colourful description of John the Baptist. "He was clothed with camel's hair," reports Mark. Football managers in the 1970s wore camel-hair. But the Baptist is no Harry Redknapp. "He was clothed with camel's hair and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey." This eccentric-looking prophet has a message. "There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose."

Mark is referring to Jesus, the latchet of whose shoes even John the Baptist feels unworthy "to stoop down and unloose".

I want to discuss two subjects. The first is our Church of England. Yes, OUR Church of England. We traditionalists may be out of fashion - now there's a tautology - but we have a right, an obligation to defend our corner. The Church does not belong to any one strand of opinion. It is most certainly not the sole property of the timid tendency - those Anglicans, many in senior positions, who are equality-obsessed; the hand-wringers, the managerialists, those guppy Herberts (and Harriets) who clutch their necks when they contemplate the secularist threat.

My second subject could scarce be different. He is your departing rector, Peter Mullen. Peter has been with you since 1998. In that time congregations have increased tenfold. St Sepulchre's has reopened. There has been restoration, a revival both musical and spiritual. This has been a remarkable ministry but Peter is a remarkable man. Happy the parish that inherits him. Bold the bearded bishop who feels he can allow such a priest lightly to slip through his fingers.

Is Peter in some ways a John the Baptist figure? He has a better wardrobe. To see him stride along Cornhill in priestly garb, with flying saucer hat, is a grand sight. Nor have I seen our man settle, of a lunchtime, for an improving plate of locusts and wild honey. He prefers something chateau-bottled. But like the Baptist, Peter speaks his mind. He has occasionally irked officialdom. Correction. He has FREQUENTLY irked officialdom. The terrestrial authorities, like Salome, may have itched for his head on a platter. If you can measure a man by his critics, Father Mullen has little to fear. Thank-you, Peter and Lynne, for your devoted work here.

The Obadiah Slopes who have found Peter a turbulent priest tend to approach life more warily, as zoo visitors will tiptoe toward the lion cage. These careerist dainties quake. Quiver. They lack the swagger - certitude is a better word - which marks men of real faith.

Do priests have doubts? I am sure they do. If Thomas (which is called Didymus) had his reservations, we must allow our curates the occasional private wobble. But is it not their duty to keep those anxieties to themselves? Would not that be the stamp of leaders?

In today's Church, alas, leadership and majesty and liturgical awe are regarded with suspicion. Leadership involves inequality, the led being, logically, on a lower plane than those who lead. If there is one thing today's off-the-peg Anglican vicar disowns, it is inequality. He is embarrassed by Establishment. He shies away from rousing 19th century hymns.

This feeble egalitarianism is the cause of our Church's current anaemia. The timid tendency has sipped the quasi-Marxist Kool-Aid. Its members have been drugged to believe that all

men (and women) are equal. No need, therefore, for any leaders. No need for authority. Strike up the banjo someone. Let's gather round and sing a Joan Baez peace song.

All men equal? What nonsense. All men are different. Unless we can accept that we are different and variously unequal - unequal not least to God - why need we ever help our fellow beings? Charity is assisting the less fortunate. Its very act acknowledges inequality. And yet the egalitarian Left swoons for atheist Richard Dawkins. He is a darling of the BBC and Guardian. Spongier elements in our Church shake hands with media-savvy atheists. Consorting with badhats, I'd call it.

Darwinians espouse natural selection. Last time I looked, the law of the jungle was a bloody affair. The strong prosper. The weak are eaten. Not many of Sir David Attenborough's wildlife films would pass muster with Polly Toynbee. Do Guardian readers approve of cock fighting? Of course not. Barbaric. So why do they encourage Dawkins? Because they sense, dimly, that the Church is a hierarchy and is therefore, in the words of 1066 And All That, "a bad thing".

What distinguishes mankind is the ability to override rough instinct and dispense Christian love. What makes us human is the capital we spend in that choice. And that depends on status, social position, a concept of rank based on something other than mere strength and speed and physical attributes such as the length of our fangs. If the size of tusks were a definer of power, Janet Street-Porter would be Pope.

Altruism can make the mighty noble. Inequality allows the rich to help the poor. You won't find that in the pages of Darwin but you do find it in St Mark's Gospel. We are unworthy so much as to unloose the latchet of our Lord's shoes, yet that same Christ sacrifices Himself for us. Jesus did not surrender to the survival gene. If he had done, Barabbas would have taken an early bath. Jesus is better than Darwin and Dawkins.

When preparing these remarks, I did something grisly: I looked at the job adverts in the Church Times. To do so is to paddle in sociology's soapy waters. The recruitment jargon is full of "reaching out" and "developing mission" and "integration", and of course the ads nearly all say that applicants must be Criminal Records Bureau checked - pederasts need not apply, in other words. You don't say!

The Diocese of Oxford was looking for a "Living Faith" person. The advert asked: "Can you bring a vibrant hue to our rural parishes? Are you a positive team player? An encourager and enabler? Full of energy and enthusiasm?" It sounds more like an advert for a netball coach than for a priest who will help souls negotiate the rapids of life and death.

I know these appeasers mean well. I know they can be "nice" people. But "nice" is a horrid adjective. In a clergyman I want dignity. Wisdom. Scholarship. Grit. Leadership. Not "niceness".

Leadership is not a perk. It is not a City bank bonus. Leadership is not a chauffeur-driven BMW. Leadership is seizing the opportunity to command one's fellow mortals. They need it. Leadership is not somehow made easier by bishops calling themselves Pete or Dave and wearing CND earrings. It is not achieved by flogging off vicarages and holding ecumenical love-ins with Muslims. Nor should leadership involve conspiring against the peerless Book of Common Prayer. How dare modern liturgists presume to improve on prayers used for centuries? The arrogance! And the ineptitude! Modern liturgy is as plastic as a airline fork. St Michael's is a wonderful buttress against such rubbish. It asserts, here in the citadel, traditions of worship which shout confidence in our religious heritage. Generations have gone before us, singing these praises, mouthing these graces. Thanks to your church and your departing rector, those customs persist.

I thank God for St Michael's and I thank God for the Rev Peter Mullen, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.