
A Meditation on Lancelot Andrewes

For Evensong

A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in solstitio brumali, 'the very dead of winter.'

What?

Is it Epiphany? Are we hearing the wonderful opening lines of the poem, "Journey of the Magi?"

No, the lines I have just read were not composed by T.S. Eliot. The alert among you may have noticed the slight differences. However, the great poet, T.S. Eliot, did use the essence of these lines for his poem. He was quoting one of the great scholars of the seventeenth century Anglican Church, the man whom we remember today, Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626).

It was in the year 1622 that Lancelot Andrewes preached a Nativity sermon which included those lines:

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It is his scholarship, his precision, his order, his ability with language that we remember today. Oh, he had his positions, for sure. He was fellow of Pembroke. He was dean of Westminster. He was bishop of Chichester, and then Ely, and then finally bishop of Winchester.

It is said that he spent five hours a day in prayer. One of his compositions, *Preces Privatae*, is a collection of the prayers and devotions that he used. He didn't actually write many of those devotions; rather, he collected them from other places. Maybe he was like T.S. Eliot that way, using the material of others.

His chief reputation was as a preacher and scholar. Richard Schmidt writes that, "He preached in the "witty" or "metaphysical" style of the time, which rarely referred to personal matters or current concerns, but strictly confined itself to the exploration of a biblical idea. Andrewes dissected his biblical texts minutely, including etymological analyses of Hebrew and Greek words. ... Even T. S. Eliot, who loved them [the sermons], said that Andrewes "takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should have supposed any word to possess." (Richard H. Schmidt, *Glorious Companions*, p. 35.)

As a great scholar, it is said that he was fluent in fifteen languages, and that he strived to master one new language every year. When he said his prayers, he did so in three languages, and none of them was English.

He had a precise and beautiful ability with words. When King James, around 1604, put together the scholars who would compile an Authorized Version of Holy Scripture, it was Lancelot Andrewes who was put in charge of the Winchester division of scholars. Many people point to that product, the great King James Version of the Bible, as the greatest achievement of Lancelot Andrewes. He was one of its leading translators.

Thus, Lancelot Andrewes lived a balanced, orderly, and disciplined life – as opposed, I might say, to the volatility and earthiness of John Donne, who was his contemporary and my own hero!

It is fitting that the observance of the order and precision of Lancelot Andrewes falls on this day, at the Cathedral of St. Philip, that we dedicate and bless a new continuo organ for this sacred place, the Moore-Wilkerson Continuo Organ. This instrument will reward those whose precision and care and order and discipline match that of Lancelot Andrewes. This is an instrument whose beauty will be appreciated by the careful and steady musician, who does not mind working quietly in the background of great compositions like the King James Bible!

Glory to God for the benefactors and builders of this new organ for the Cathedral. Glory to God for the man in whose memory the organ is given. And glory to God for all who will play this organ, and hear this organ, with the same precision and care with which Lancelot Andrewes used words.

Glory to God for each of us, for all of us, who strive to produce words and music with love and order, with precision and care.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip