



SERMON 907

January 7, 2015

Feast of William Laud

979th Week as Priest

806th Week at St Dunstan's

71st Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

THE MIDDLE WAY

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

I confess that I am surprised to find a lesser feast in honor of Archbishop William Laud. Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633 and has remained a controversial figure in church history to the present day.

Archbishop Laud was the loyal and devout servant of King Charles I, the second son of James VI and VI, King of All England, Scotland, and Ireland, of the House of Stuart.

Laud used his office as head of the English church, and as judge of the Courts of High Commission and the Star Chamber, to impose harsh sentences on prominent Puritans of his day. He pressed a war on Scotland over the Scots' revolt against the Book of Common Prayer. He was singularly convinced of his orthodoxy and his right judgment, and many

suffered for disagreeing with him. Laud made no compromise, and he suffered fools and rebels only long enough to execute them. He was impeached by the Long Parliament in 1640 and beheaded five years later.

Archbishop Laud believed strongly in the divine right of kings; the unity of Church and State; and the unpopular policies of Charles I, who was put to death by Oliver Cromwell's "roundheads" in 1649. These were the soldiers of the Commonwealth's puritan army, bent on the destruction of kings and lords, bishops and priests, the traditions and institutions of English life. Charles I represented all that deserved destruction or radical reform in their estimation, because he was the central figure of power, control, and ultimate authority.

On the scaffold, William Laud made a noble end, praying, "The Lord receive my soul, and have mercy upon me, and bless this kingdom with peace and charity, that there may not be this effusion of Christian blood amongst them."

Upon Charles's fall from power, Oliver Cromwell became "Lord Protector," and he dissolved Parliament and disestablished the Church. It was a bleak and bloody time.

The story of English church history is a complicated one, and there is a tendency among many people to reduce the

truth to simple right and wrong. Some say that the Puritans stood for religious freedom, and that William Laud was a harsh and intolerant defender of governmental authority. Others will see Laud as a martyr and reformer, a loyal subject of the king and devout churchman—and the Puritans and their ilk as troublemakers and rule breakers, rabble rousers who would tear down the institutions and traditions of proper English society.

The truth typically lies somewhere between the extremes. We call that the *via media*, the middle way. It was the spirit of an earlier time, that of Queen Elizabeth I, whose Elizabethan Settlement honored both the protestant and the catholic sides of Anglicanism and was able to hold them together in a kind of attractive ambiguity.

The extremes, I have found, whether they are liberal or conservative, high church or low church, protestant or catholic, tend to drive the faith to excess, to violence, and to oppression. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials are just a few examples.

Richard Hooker, an Anglican divine of the same generation as Elizabeth I, saw the faith as a comprehension for the sake of truth rather than a compromise for the sake of peace. If we, as the people of God, are unwilling to slow down, exercise patience and forbearance, and seek

understanding—then we will be sure to repeat the excesses of the extremes and the sins of the past.

The impatience and extremism present in the Church today is as dangerous and wrong-spirited as were the round heads and the loyalists of the 17th Century. Once again, it is time to exercise patience and forbearance, to find the middle way, and to seek the truth of the Gospel in all things. **AMEN.**