

Thomas Ken. Bishop 1685 - 1691.

Thomas Ken was not only a deeply pious Christian (an outspoken opponent of Rome and a "traditional" high church Anglican), but he was a man of enormous integrity and great courage. It was this combination of personal characteristics which led him to do some unusual things during his lifetime:

- Openly criticise Prince William of Orange (later King William III) on account of his treatment of his wife Mary (niece of Charles II)
- Refuse to accommodate Nell Gwynn at his home in Winchester, because she was the King's mistress.
- Nevertheless he attended Charles II on his deathbed.
- Refuse to publish the Declaration of Indulgence issued by James II, on the grounds that it was pro-Roman Catholic.
- Nevertheless after the exile of James II, he refused to swear an oath of allegiance to William III - a good protestant - because he believed in the Divine Right of Kings.
- Invite 12 poor men of his diocese to lunch every Sunday and (long before doggy bags were invented) openly encourage them to take left-over food home to their families.
- Minister to those taken prisoner during the Monmouth Rebellion (which he personally opposed, since it rebelled against a lawful king), including the Duke of Monmouth himself before his execution

All these acts were motivated by his Christian beliefs, but all required integrity and courage to carry out.

There is a tradition that he used to compose his hymns and prayers whilst walking up and down Bishop Ken's Walk in the Palace Gardens, However, all the evidence suggests that these compositions were principally completed before he became Bishop of Bath and Wells.

What is certain is that in his day he was a most celebrated preacher. It is possible that this was because he was so controversial in his utterances - Charles II is reported as having stated his intention to attend a Ken sermon "because he will remind me of all the things I have done wrong." Sadly, however, his sermons were never published, so his literary legacy largely comprises his works of poetry and prose. And he is also remembered on account of his spirituality.

The chronology of his life was as follows:

- 1637. Born. Both his parents died when Thomas was very young.
- 1641 His step sister Anne married Izaak Walton and they brought up young Thomas. Izaak Walton who was not only keen on fishing but also very devout, is believed to have been a major influence on Thomas Ken.
- 1652 Winchester College
- 1657 Became Fellow of New College, Oxford
- 1661 BA
- 1662 Ordained. Subsequently held livings, principally in the Diocese of Winchester (Hampshire)
- 1664 MA
- 1672 Prebendary of Winchester Cathedral and Chaplain to Bishop Morley (a friend of Walton)
- 1674 Published "A manual of prayers for the scholars of Winchester College"
- 1674 Visited Rome, in company with Izaak Walton.
- 1679 Appointed by Charles II as Chaplain to Princess Mary of Orange.
- 1680 Returned to England, having fallen out with Prince William of Orange. Appointed Chaplain to the King (Charles II)
- 1683 Charles II visit to Winchester. Ken refused to accommodate Nell Gwynn.

- 1684 Appointed by Charles II as Bishop of Bath and Wells ("Where is the good little man who refused his lodging to poor Nell?").
- 1685 Attended the dying King Charles II.
- 1685 Published "The Practice of Divine Love"
- 1685 Monmouth Rebellion. Ministered to prisoners and to the Duke of Monmouth
- 1687 Publication by James II of Declaration of Indulgence. Ken is one of 7 bishops to refuse publication in his diocese.
- 1688 Imprisoned in the Tower of London. Tried (along with six other bishops) for sedition. Acquitted.
- 1691 Refused to swear Oath of Allegiance to King William III, because James II was still alive. Deprived of his bishopric. Went to live at Longleat House as guest of Viscount Weymouth (a college friend), who also gave him a pension of £80 p.a.
- 1703 After death of Bishop Kidder (Ken's successor at Bath and Wells), declined Queen Anne's invitation to resume as Bishop of Bath and Wells. Instead he interceded on behalf of Bishop Hooper, and as a result received an annual pension of £200.
- 1711 Died at Longleat. Buried at St. John's Church Frome (the nearest Bath and Wells diocesan parish to Longleat).

Thomas Ken is believed to have been a major influence on Thomas Thynne (Viscount Weymouth) in the latter's philanthropic activities whilst Ken was his "house guest" at Longleat.

Lord Macauley (apparently an improbable ally) said of Ken "His character approaches as near as human infirmity permits, to the ideal perfection of Christian virtue"

He is commemorated by a statue on the west front of Winchester Cathedral.

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