

## Eminent English Churchmen By the Reverend Canon Arthur Middleton

### Thomas Ken (1637-1711)

**A** HYMN FAMILIAR to most readers is *Her virgin eyes saw God Incarnate born, When she to Bethl'em came that happy morn, so too is Glory to Thee, my God, this night, and Awake, my soul, and with the sun.* They were written by Thomas Ken whose sheer goodness, in difficult times, attracted the admiration of people who did not necessarily agree with him. Even Lord Macaulay, a man as ecclesiastically and politically opposite as anyone could be, was able to say of Ken that, "His character approaches, as near as human infirmity permits, to the ideal of perfection of Christian virtue." This sums up how most people regarded him. Ken was certainly no Mr. Pliable, a peace at any price sort of man who tried to please everybody. Like John the Baptist he had that steel of independence that could boldly rebuke vice and error without fear of the consequences and it could break out sharply in what he wrote.

### Biography

He was born at Berkhamstead in 1637 where his parents died when he was very young, so that he was brought up by a half-sister Anna, twenty years older and married to Izaak Walton the friend and biographer of Richard Hooker, George Herbert and others. Perhaps this author of *The Compleat Angler* taught young Thomas how to fish. After Winchester and Oxford he was given the parish of Little Easton in Essex. From a sermon preached at Lady Maynard's funeral, we learn that he introduced daily prayers, morning and evening, in the parish church of Little Easton. In 1665 he became chaplain to Bishop Morley at Winchester with the poor parish of St. John-in-the-Soke. Ken was elected a fellow of Winchester in 1666, and the Bishop made him Vicar of Brighthstone in the Isle of Wight in 1667, a Prebendary of Winchester and rector of East Woodhay in 1669. In 1672 he returned to Winchester and his former parish of Soke.

Ken was a High Churchman and his strong churchmanship offended William, Prince of Orange, when in 1679 he was appointed chaplain to Princess Mary at the Hague. So too did his boldly rebuking vice in a courtier. The royals received the same cautions and rebukes from one who was no flatterer of Kings. While Chaplain to King Charles II in 1680 Ken was asked to offer accomodation to Nell Gwyn the King's mistress, on his visit to Winchester, and flatly refused, but it did not deter James in 1684 from offering him the bishopric of Bath and Wells. In 1685 as the King lay dying Ken again resisted his pleas for his ministry until "the notorious Duchess of Portsmouth had left the room", after which it is reported that he spoke as one inspired.

## The Faithful Bishop

As a bishop he was efficient and faithful and travelled round his diocese ministering to clergy and people. He gave meticulous pastoral care to his clergy, encouraging daily services and preaching in the parish churches. At the same time he was lavish in his charitable giving to those in need and when at home on Sundays he always invited twelve poor people to dine with him but afterwards gave them spiritual nourishment as well. He wrote a number of works for the instruction of his own diocese. *The Practice of Divine Love* (1685) was the Church Catechism presented in the form of a Manual of Devotion. Here Ken exhibits not only a pastoral love for the souls committed to his care but also that doctrinal standard from which he never wavered and nor ever compromised. In the section on the Church he wrote:

Glory to Thee, O Lord my God, who has made me a member of the particular Church of England, whose faith and government and worship are holy and Catholic and Apostolic, and free from the extremes of irreverence and superstition; and which I firmly believe to be a sound part of Thy Church universal, and which teaches me charity to those who dissent from me; and therefore all love, all glory, be to Thee.

Other titles include *Directions for Prayer for the diocese of Bath and Wells*, is a book of simple devotions and intercessions for the ordinary folks that comprised his diocese. He also wrote *Prayers for the Use of All Resorting to the Baths at Bath*, and *A Pastoral Letter to his Clergy concerning their behaviour during Lent*.

In the last year of James II's reign, when his attempts to undermine the Anglican Church had stirred ecclesiastical and political excitement, Ken had again to withstand the King. On the first Sunday in April Ken was to preach at the Chapel Royal in Whitehall. John Evelyn noted in his diary that the morning service was greatly upset by crowds of people rushing to secure seats for Ken's afternoon sermon. In the sermon Ken boldly set forth the claims of the English Church upon the English people. The King had been to a Roman Catholic service but summoned Ken to tell him he had heard strange reports about his sermon. Ken replied, 'if your Majesty had not neglected your duty of being present, my enemies had missed this opportunity of accusing me.' This steely independence and fearlessness sprang from the bishop's utter devotion to God in a disposition that was naturally quiet and shy.

The Monmouth Rebellion that ended in the battle of Sedgmoor was one of those events in which the nobility of Ken's spirit shone out. He was not in sympathy, politically or ecclesiastically, with the rebels, who ravaged and desecrated his cathedral, but he was ready to minister to the needs of the prisoners whom he visited day and night returning good for evil and appealing to the conquerors not to be cruel to them. His attitude was the same to the French Protestants who had fled to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Some Churchmen were reticent about helping them because they were more like English Dissenters than English Churchmen but Ken preached on their behalf at Whitehall and donated a personal sum of £4000 for their relief.

## A Sad Conclusion

Sadly it seemed to some, though not to Ken, a political reason brought his episcopate to a sad end. In spite of his strong opposition to James II, Ken and those who shared his views remained loyal to the King at the time of the Revolution in 1688/89. Their belief in the divine right of Kings prevented them from taking the oath of allegiance to his successor William of Orange. They regarded James's deposition as wholly illegal and morally wrong because they believed that a king whether good or bad, held this office by divine right, and that no Parliament could depose him. Having sworn allegiance to James, they found it impossible during his lifetime to take the oath of allegiance to William. For them it was a religious promise and vow made in the name of God, a matter of moral principle rather than politics. The Archbishop of Canterbury, seven bishops, and four hundred clergy refused as a matter of conscience to swear an oath of allegiance to William. In 1691 they were deprived of their posts and Ken lost his beloved diocese, cathedral and his work for the Church of England. His friend Lord Weymouth invited him to make his home at Longleat where he spent the remainder of his life in that tranquil setting. Queen Anne wanted to reinstate him in 1702 but his health prevented it. He died after a long illness in 1711 and was buried outside the East window of Frome church.

Let no ill dreams disturb my rest,  
No powers of darkness me molest.

When, in the future we sing that evening hymn, perhaps we can remember with thankfulness the witness of good Bishop Ken, whose dying words were:

I die in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic faith professed by the whole church before the disunion of East and West; more particularly I die in the communion of the Church of England, as it stands distinguished from all papal and puritanical innovations, and as it adheres to the doctrine of the Cross.