

Interlude: Reflections on the Baptism of an Infant Princess

On the 5th of July 2015 at the church of St Mary Magdalene, Sandringham, little Princess Charlotte Diana Elizabeth, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and great-grand-daughter of the Queen of England, was baptised into the Christian faith.

I rather like what was said, of this event, by one Mary Kenny in an article published in the Belfast Telegraph:

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/mary-kenny/princess-charlottes-christening-shows-the-bonds-of-religion-really-are-good-for-us-all-31373593.html>

“A christening is a naming ceremony, but it also marks the child’s entry into the Christian community. A royal christening, like a royal wedding, is just “a brilliant edition of an everyday fact.”

And with that in mind let us consider excerpts from couple of accounts of the baptism. Along the way we will enjoy some of the truly lovely music that was played and sung during the service.

Australia’s ABC had this to say.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-05/intimate-low-key-christening-of-princess-charlotte-draws-crowds/6596596>

‘Princess Charlotte Christened in Intimate Ceremony at St Mary Magdalene Church’

‘Princess Charlotte has been christened in an intimate ceremony, in the royal baby’s second public appearance since her birth nine weeks ago to Prince William and Kate.

'Just 21 guests attended the low-key baptism held inside the 16th-century church of St Mary Magdalene on the country estate of the baby's great-grandmother Queen Elizabeth II in Sandringham, as crowds waited outside.

'Overnight campers and early risers, many wearing Union Jack-printed clothing, had braved wet weather to get a prime spot on the paddock outside the church.

'William and Kate walked to the service from a nearby royal residence with Charlotte and her brother George...

'Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, the spiritual head of the world's Anglicans, performed the baptism, using the ornate silver-gilt Lily Font that is part of the crown jewels, and pouring holy water from the River Jordan on the baby's head...

There is an element of sad irony in this: that the Queen, and Prince Charles, and William, and little prince George, and now little Princess Charlotte, have all been baptised in water brought all the way from the River Jordan, which flows through the land of Israel and waters the modern Jewish state of Israel...a nation that, although it was part of the British Empire between 1919 and 1947, has never once since achieving its independence been officially visited by any member of the British Royal Family...- CM

'William and Kate said Charlotte would have five godparents, including William's cousin Laura Fellowes and Kate's cousin Adam Middleton. The others were Kate's friend Sophie Carter and two close friends of William, James Meade and Thomas Van Straubenzee.

'The parents have said they want their children to have relatively normal upbringings and have closely guarded their privacy, bringing them up in the secluded mansion Anmer Hall, close to the church...

'The service comprised two hymns, one lesson, and two anthems,

according to a statement from Kensington Palace.

'The hymns were "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" (that is, Joachim Neander's lovely hymn Lobet den Herrn, in the English versification by Catherine Winkworth – CM), and "Come Down, O Love Divine" (that is, Richard F Littledale's paraphrase of Bianco da Siena's spiritual poem, Discendi Amor Santo; "Come Down O Love Divine" is sung to a setting written specially for it by Ralph Vaughan Williams and known as "Down Ampney", after the place where Littledale was born – CM) while the lesson was from Matthew 18, verses 1-5, read by new godparent Meade.

Matthew 18.1-5 reads as follows: "At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name, receiveth me."

Now, before we proceed any further, we will pause and listen to the two hymns that were sung during the service.

Here is a rather lovely version of "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation", sung by the London Philharmonia Choir.

And here is "Come Down O Love Divine", sung by the Choir of Kings College, Cambridge.

'The guests and members of the Sandringham Church Choir joined in with anthems "I Will Sing With the Spirit" and "God Be In My Head", both by John Rutter.

Both of these are lovely, gentle, reflective spiritual compositions.

Again, we will pause and listen.

Here is "I will sing with the spirit".

And here is "God Be in My Head", sung by the Nanzan University Schola Cantorum.

'The service also included music from Vaughan Williams and Handel.

'Afterwards, guests enjoyed tea and cake at Sandringham House, the Queen's nearby country retreat, including slices of christening cake – cut from a tier of William and Kate's 2011 wedding cake."

A rather more detailed account of the baptism was provided by Lucy Crossley, Ruth Styles and Jennifer Newton for the Daily Mail. I will reproduce selected excerpts.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3149880/Cambridges-pictured-family-four-time-Princess-Charlotte-s-christening-today.html>

“Kate’s Little Cutie Entrances a Nation”.

‘It was the first glimpse of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge with both of their children, as Princess Charlotte melted the hearts of the nation on her christening...

‘The family of four made the journey to the church of St Mary Magdalene in Sandringham together for the private ceremony, attended by just 21 official guests including the Queen and Prince Philip, as well as other close family members and the nine-week-old princess’s five godparents...

‘Also making their way to the church were Kate’s parents, Carole and Michael Middleton, sister Pippa and brother James, as well as Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall, although Prince Harry, currently in Namibia, missed out...The other guests arrived by car, while William, Kate and their children were the only ones to arrive on foot. Charlotte’s five godparents...were also seen entering the church, where the royal family worship on Christmas Day each year.

‘The church is also where Diana herself was christened in 1961, a further nod to William’s mother, who was also honoured by the couple when they chose Charlotte’s middle names, Elizabeth Diana.

‘The princess was christened in a short private service conducted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Right Reverend Justin Welby, supported by the Reverend Canon Jonathan Riviere, the rector of the Sandringham group of parishes...

‘Standing beside the font as Charlotte was christened were her five godparents...

‘During the service, members of the congregation sang two hymns chosen by William and Kate, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”, which was sung at the Westminster Abbey Service marking the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in June 2013, and “Come Down, O Love Divine. They also heard anthems “I Will Sing

With the Spirit” and “God Be In My Head”, both by John Rutter, sung by members of the Sandringham Church Choir, as well as Ralph Vaughan Williams’ “Prelude on ‘Rhosymedre’” – processional organ music which William and Kate selected for their marriage ceremony at Westminster Abbey and which also featured at the wedding of William’s parents the Prince of Wales and Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1981; as well as Handel’s “Overture and Allegro from Concerto VIII in A”, performed on the organ.

I observe that William and Kate chose the hymns themselves. It is rather nice to know that one of my favourite hymns – “Come Down O Love Divine” – which is much beloved by many, many English-speaking Christians – is also a favourite of the Queen’s grandson and his wife! – CM

‘Godfather James Meade read a lesson from Matthew 18, verses 1-5, also selected by Kate and William...

And an excellent choice. – CM

‘Anyone (from among the crowd of wellwishers that gathered in the fields outside – CM) bringing flowers was asked to give them to representatives of East Anglia’s Childrens Hospices (EACH), where Kate is a patron, who will then take them to hospices in the region...

‘Princess Charlotte’s appearance ws only the seocnd glimpse of the Princess in public since she was born, although William and Kate have released heartwarming photographs of their baby daughter with proud older brother George, which were taken by the Duchess...”.

And the Daily Mail, to do them credit, included an inset box with the complete text of the Archbishop’s homily from the service, which may also be read in full here (I encourage interested parties to click, read, and reflect).

<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5583/prince>

[ss-charlottes-baptism-read-the-archbishops-homily](#)

It is worth reflecting that in the course of his Homily the Archbishop referred particularly to the Christian example set by a kinswoman of Charlotte's, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, who is among the Twentieth Century Martyrs honoured in a series of statues placed above the western door of Westminster Cathedral:

"At our best we seek beauty, not necessarily of form, but of life.

"In the reading from Matthew 18, Jesus is trying to turn one kind of ambition, an ambition for place and prestige, into an ambition for a beautiful life. To be great in the Kingdom of Heaven, he tells his very pushy disciples, is not about position but about beauty of life, a life that looks like his

Do I hear, here, an echo of the Eastern Orthodox concept of the "philokalia", and of what modern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart calls "the beauty of the form of Christ"? – CM

'and his example is someone unimportant in those days, a child.

'Amongst Princess Charlotte's own ancestors (*strictly speaking, not a direct ancestor, but certainly a kinswoman, an aunt – CM*), now buried in the Holy Land, is a saint, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, whose life was one of transparent beauty and death one of beautiful courage and service. In her life she forgave the man who killed her husband. At her cruel murder she continued to care for those suffering with her.

The full story of the Saint, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, may be read here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_Elisabeth_of_Hesse_and_by_Rhine_\(1864–1918\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_Elisabeth_of_Hesse_and_by_Rhine_(1864–1918))

'It is of such beauty that Jesus speaks when he talks of being

great in the kingdom of Heaven.

'Such beauty of character begins with baptism and is established in the habits of following and loving Jesus Christ, habits to be learned from parents and godparents and the whole community of the church.

'Beauty is the implied prayer of the baptism service, beauty of life which brings true and eternal greatness.

'In such times as ours, those who suffer, such as the wounded or bereaved in Tunisia and other places, need lives of beauty around them, lives that share healing and hope, offering to all around them, both in times of light and darkness, a vision of a Christ-filled future."

Yes. Little Princess Charlotte has been born into a very dark age, and into a very dark – and darkening time in the history of her own nation. The story of the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, Saint and Martyr, alluded to by the Archbishop at Charlotte's baptism, is a stark reminder that no-one is wholly secure: tthat there are times when even Christians of the highest worldly degree may be called upon to face danger, suffering and even death because of their faith. In the face of deepening darkness and in the shadow of the global Jihad I say to our baby princess the great words – both a command and a prayer – hich the modern Anglican liturgy requires us to say to all the newly-baptised: "Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father". May her life be indeed filled with and radiate that heavenly light. – CM