

‘THE OFFSCOURING OF THE EARTH’: THE PESSIMISTIC THEOLOGY OF CANON ABRAHAM MARKLAND OF WINCHESTER

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ABSTRACT

The Revd Abraham Markland held a canonry of Winchester and the mastership of St Cross Hospital, Winchester for over thirty years. He was in many respects an obscure and little known churchman. However the sermons he preached at Winchester Cathedral, which were published after his death in 1728, reveal him to have developed a distinctive theological reaction to the turbulence of the period. In contrast to clergy who adopted High and Low Church responses to the religious debates of the time, and Whig or Tory reactions to the political events of the day, Markland taught his congregation not to trust human endeavour and to avoid placing faith in human ideas. It was a rare theological viewpoint, and one which found little purchase in the early years of the enlightenment. Nevertheless, Markland's views show the diversity of reaction to the ideas and events of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

Abraham Markland has not left much of a mark on history. He was a canon of Winchester and master of St Cross in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He is best known for the ‘custumal’ which made the master of St Cross the receiver of all the hospital's revenues and gave him control of all the income of the hospital. In actual fact this had been a makeshift solution to the problem of paying for the dilapidations of his predecessor, but the practice became permanent. By the nineteenth century, when the practice was overturned in the courts, it was attacked as having become ‘a wilful breach of trust.’ Thus Markland is remembered for one, apparently disreputable, action and his thought and theology have been largely forgotten (Spicer 2005). But Markland's

theological views give a fascinating insight into the reaction of a clergyman to the turbulence and disturbances of the fifty years during which he worked in the diocese of Winchester.

The outlines of Markland's career are only thinly documented. He was born in 1645, the son of a London apothecary, and educated at Merchant Taylors' School and at St John's College, Oxford. He graduated in 1666 and was elected a fellow of his college. Markland was a convinced Tory and as a youth at Oxford he attracted attention by publishing poems commemorating, among other things, the anniversaries of the births of Charles II and Prince Rupert and reflecting on the Great Fire of London (Markland 1667). He was ordained in 1672 and received a series of significant preferments in the diocese of Winchester – perhaps because his loyalist sentiments found favour with successive Tory bishops of Winchester. After three years as rector of Brightstone, Isle of Wight, he was appointed by Bishop George Morley to the living of Easton near Winchester in 1677. A year later Morley appointed him to the valuable rectory of Houghton and in 1684 to that of Meonstoke. In July 1679 Morley had made Markland a canon of Winchester and in 1694 Bishop Peter Mews, Morley's successor and also a Tory, appointed him to the mastership of St Cross Hospital – one of the prize appointments in his gift. From 1694 Markland remained quietly in possession of his livings before his death in July 1728 at the age of eighty-three. Thus Markland rose from relatively poor family origins to become a significant clergyman of the diocese of Winchester and a man of some wealth and position.

Markland's elevated social status enabled him

to marry Catherine Pitt, daughter of Edward Pitt and Rachel Morton of Stratfield Saye; their son, George, was born on 18 November 1678, and they also had a daughter, Jane. With his second wife, Elizabeth (d. 1734), he had a son, Abraham (d. 1705), who died in infancy, and two daughters, Elizabeth and Anne (Spicer 2005). Of Markland's family we know little. His son George was the author of *Pteryplegia: or, the art of shooting-flying, a poem*, published by Stephen Austen in 1727 (and erroneously ascribed to Abraham Markland by the *English Short Title Catalogue*). A popular work, two editions appeared more or less simultaneously, it was a remarkable and spirited poem on hunting pheasants and partridge. Markland had a daughter by his first wife, for whom he invested money in the 1693 Tontine. In 1692 the 'Million Act', was passed with the aim of raising one million pounds for the government. For every hundred pounds paid in, the contributor, or their nominees, would receive a tax-free dividend for the life of the nominee. This dividend was 10% for the first seven years and 7% thereafter. Named after its Italian inventor, called Tontini, the scheme was known as the 1693 Tontine. The fund was undersubscribed by the closing date of 1st May 1693 and only £108,100 was advanced to the Million Fund, far short of the target. There were 1,012 individual nominees most of whom were young children, including the twelve year old Jane Markland, described as 'daughter of Abraham Markland of Winton in the county of Southampton, clerk'. By 1749 there were still 269 nominees surviving (Anon 1749). Abraham Markland was buried in the south side of the chancel of the chapel of St Cross. The pavement contains slabs to both Abraham Markland, and to Catherine, his wife who died in 1695 (VCH, v, 69).

Markland's only significant mark on national events came in October 1682 when he preached before the aldermen of the City of London. 1682 was a moment of national disturbance and unrest: King Charles II was aging and attempts were being made by the Whigs to exclude his Catholic brother, James, Duke of York from succeeding to the throne. There were rumours of plots and counterplots, which culminated

in the Rye House Plot to assassinate Charles II and in the entirely trumped up Popish Plot. In such times sermons took on a political aspect and Markland's sermon in October 1682 was no exception. The City of London was firmly in Tory control and Markland's sermon was well received because it was a strongly Tory loyalist statement. He denounced the Whigs and non-conformists for a factionalism which had led the City into degeneracy and contempt for its governors. He attacked the Whigs as men who were impenitent at the death of Charles I, who would prefer to ignore the commemoration of the king's execution and who might treat Charles II in the same way as his father. All this was the standard fare of a Tory Cavalier Anglican who sought to strengthen and entrench the Church and monarchy and to attack the forces of Whiggery and nonconformity (Markland 1683). Thereafter Markland's mind seems to have turned to more philosophical matters. In 1705 he published *A divine poem in memory of the late high wind* commemorating the damaging storms of 1703 (HRO, HP260).

However Markland's 1682 sermon and his poetry were not his only forays into the public forum. Two volumes of his sermons, preached while he was canon of Winchester, were printed in 1729 after his death. They were produced by John Pemberton, a London publisher who had previously collaborated with Edmund Curll in printing the works of the Whig historian John Oldmixon (Rogers 2005). Pemberton printed and sold books by the Golden Buck by St Dunstan's church in Fleet Street. The volumes contain no information about their publication at all, nor of the occasions on which they had been preached, but – as there was no subscription for them – Pemberton must have calculated that there was a sufficient market for them, probably in Winchester as well as further afield. It seems a likely conjecture that the collection was edited by one of Markland's sons; clearly Abraham Markland had preserved a number of his sermons. The volumes may have had a small print-run, since there survives only one copy of volume one and four of volume two according to the *English Short Title Catalogue* (ESTC).

The sermons, twelve in the first volume and fifteen in the second, have largely gone unnoticed by historians. But they are an important body of theology. They shed light on the opinions and views of a churchman who lived through the years of the Restoration, the Glorious Revolution, the Hanoverian Succession. These may have been the principal political events of Markland's life, but he also lived through the religious turmoil of the restoration of the Church of England in 1660, the ejection of nonconformists in 1662, the persecution of dissenters under the Clarendon Code, the Catholic menace of James II's reign, the Toleration Act of 1689, the Convocation Controversy, the Sacheverell sermon and trial, the Bangorian Controversy and the trial and banishment of Bishop Atterbury. The years 1660–1722 were perhaps the most highly contested years in English religion since the Reformation. Clergymen found themselves divided into Low and High Churchmen, those who opposed James II and those who supported him, those who endorsed toleration and those who resented it, those who wanted a strengthening of the Church's power of censure and those who did not, and those who agreed with Hoadly that Christ had left no visible authority on earth and those who did not (Gibson 2004).

It was a period of religious switchbacks. The triumphant presbyterian regime of the Commonwealth era was brought to an end by the restoration of the Church of England in 1660 and the ejections of presbyterians in 1662; the tensions between Anglicanism and dissent were resolved by their alliance against Catholicism in the late 1680s; the Whig Latitudinarians favoured by William III were not the churchmen patronised by Queen Anne (who favoured Tory high churchmen), and the Tory High Church ascendancy of 1710–1714 was brought to an end by the Whig latitudinarian preferences of the house of Hanover. Churchmanship, principles and clergy who found favour at one time were unfashionable, reprehensible and censured at another. In such a topsy-turvy world, the vicar of Bray's frequent changes of principle was the only way to keep in with every religious reversal of fortune. It was easy for a churchman to find

himself stranded on the wrong side of a divide when events moved on.

In Winchester, from the Restoration the bishopric had been held by a succession of Tory bishops, George Morley, Peter Mews and Sir Jonathon Trelawny. But in 1721 the low church Whig Charles Trimmell was appointed to Winchester, and two years later the even more staunchly latitudinarian Whig Richard Willis succeeded him. The churchmanship of the diocese was thrown into reverse and Trimmell and Willis started to replace Tory high churchmen with Whig low churchmen. Markland would have seen this immediately in his colleagues in the chapter of Winchester, where Trimmell's son, William, became dean in 1722 and the heterodox Alured Clarke became a canon of Winchester in 1723. This was the start of a wholesale clear-out of the diocese, completed by Bishop Benjamin Hoadly between 1734 and 1761 (Gibson 2004, chapter 7). Unsurprisingly, Markland found himself increasingly isolated on the chapter among men of a very different kidney to their predecessors.

Given his earlier support for the high church Tory Anglican position in 1682, Markland might have been expected to have found his position uncomfortable, especially after the Tory episcopates of Bishops Morley, Mews and Trelawny. But in his sermons preached in Winchester Cathedral, Markland did not pursue reactionary Tory high church dogma. In his earliest sermons in the cathedral, principally collected in the first volume of his sermons, Markland taught the orthodox doctrine of the Church, drawing exclusively on the four gospels for his texts and limiting himself to expositions of Christ's parables and his miracles. But in time Markland abandoned this narrow theology and began to preach with one eye on broader issues, and those that addressed the complex events of the age. However Markland did not expound the high church view of the need for greater Church discipline, or the dangers of toleration or the dubious doctrines of the latitudinarians. Instead Markland drew heavily on the book of Ecclesiastes and its reproof of 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity' to preach ten

sermons which sought to turn his congregation away from the issues of the day.

Markland argued that men, kings and princes came and went, but the world remained the same. This became the centrepiece of his theology: the frailty and impermanence of mankind and the world humanity had created. Even ideas perished: 'how many notions and opinions have we seen in great Reputation asserted, maintain'd, extoll'd and admir'd ... and yet have the very same notions sunk again and lost their esteem and reputation?' (Markland 1729, ii, 15). He argued that men were proud and vain and 'there is in all men since Adam a little tincture of Rebellion, and a Taint of Disobedience, a scorn of anything that looks like subjection; a Desire of Freedom and an affectation of Liberty; they expect to be left to their own understandings and not be guided by others'. But, argued Markland, the 'instability of things' and the constant change of ideas taught men not to put faith in mankind but in God. It was better to be 'lights in the dark' than opinionated worldly men (Markland 1729, ii, 17–21). Even knowledge was dangerous: after all Ecclesiastes argued that 'he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow'. Human knowledge was arduous to obtain, by nature imperfect and 'the little esteem it meets in the world' was contempt. Knowledge, argued Markland, died with each man. Knowledge led men astray, and knowledge led to the decline of religion: 'this is the glory, the very genius and the Talent of the Present Age, to be distinguished from all other Ages by this mark and character; a blacker [one] than that of the eleventh or twelfth centuries and the consequences worse, not only the corruption but the utter loss of all Religion ...' (Markland 1729, ii, 27–43).

Pleasure was as dangerous as knowledge, leading to the 'dropsy of pride' and the 'scorbutick of Latitude' (Markland 1729, ii, 51–55). Even honour was of little merit for Markland. It led men to vanity and worldly problems, not least the fear of loss of honour. With an eye on the events of his life, perhaps, he wrote: 'never were their fears more natural, and almost unavoidable, in such a world of Revolutions ... He

who today is the favourite of a Prince and the Darling of the People, is tomorrow the Offscouring of the Earth ...' (Markland 1729, ii, 75–86). Riches, naturally, led to covetousness and did not prevail. (Markland 1729, ii, 103) A good name, argued Markland, citing the text 'there is no remembrance of the wise', was of some lasting value and not entirely swept away by the exigencies of the day. So Markland claimed 'Rebellion was never so high and loyalty never at so low an Ebb; yet it is not so low as to make a saint of a rebel and whose chief merit or pretence to saintship was his pride and opposing his prince ...' (Markland 1729, ii, 118–130).

Markland's pessimistic view of the world and of the human condition was carried through in his other sermons. He urged his congregation to turn away from human knowledge and wisdom – which he argued were only of value for knowing how to cope with the harvests – and turn to God. 'Instead of filing our heads with learned criticisms or politick notions, or philosophical speculations', it would be better to know God than to listen to 'the learnedest clerks and the profoundest Divines' (Markland 1729, ii, 142–143). Markland's horror of the political and religious turmoil of the day led him to extreme views. In preaching on St Mark's injunction that 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath', Markland claimed 'it were better for mankind never to enter into society, than not to resolve beforehand upon some kind of government, so better no church at all, than a church in such confusion ...' (Markland 1729, ii, 193–195). While it was a reproach to a prince to find churches empty, Markland urged his congregation to thirst to worship God 'like as a hart desires the Water Brookes' (Markland 1729, ii, 211). Such passages have echoes of some of the ascetic preaching and thought of High Church Caroline churchmen, like Archbishop William Sancroft, who, after the Revolution of 1688 became a non-juror and retired to private life.

Markland shared with his high church brethren a desire for more frequent celebration of holy communion, a practice which he claimed was 'constantly neglected.' He asked: 'is once

or twice in a year, upon some set and solemn occasion, more out of custom than devotion, for company more than religion; is this just ... is it tolerable?' (Markland 1729, ii, 217–227). But Markland did not make the issue a cause with which to strike at the low churchmen, merely that it was a reason to consider a godly life and to live in daily fear of God. Markland recognised that the Test Act was a divisive influence: 'this very sacrament, the Bond of Peace and Unity, is perversely made an instrument of irreconcilable separations; it is used to strengthen not only our Religious, but to confirm and secure our very Civil Divisions. And when these things will have an end, and what will be the end of these things, none knows ...' (Markland 1729, ii, 251). As in the case of frequent communion, occasionally Markland's churchmanship and politics became apparent. In advocating daily reading of morning and evening prayer in households, he showed his view of the patriarchal nature of authority. 'A Prince in his dominion, a Bishop in his Diocese, a Priest in his Parish and a Master in his Family, they are all ... God's ministers and stewards' (Markland 1729, ii, 260). This was exactly the view of authority taken by the traditional Tory patriarchal theorists (Gibson 2007). Nevertheless his sermons do not advance the anti-latitudinarian doctrines of Tory high churchmen.

Markland's sermons were a profound reaction to the religion and politics of the day. He purposely eschewed the controversies of the day, preferring to see all human endeavour as frail and imperfect. Such a pessimistic view sought to prevent Markland's congregation from entering the controversies that beset them and to prevent them from adopting a partisan position in religion and politics. It was a theology which focused on God and abandoned the world, and was rare in England at this time. For the most part, the clergy of England threw themselves wholeheartedly into the controversies that bubbled up. The Bangorian Controversy, for example, which raged from 1717 to 1722, attracted enormous attention from clergy, who both supported and opposed the proposition that Christ had left no human authority on earth to act as judge for

him. Attacks on and defences of Hoadly poured from the press, sometimes in print runs of over a thousand at a time (Gibson 2004, 152).

There were occasional voices which were similarly raised against joining in controversies. In 1714 Daniel Whitby, precentor of Salisbury, urged unity on the Church in *A Dissuasive from Enquiring into the Doctrine of the Trinity* Whitby recognised that the clergy might be asked 'shall I not be permitted fully to understand my creed?' (Whitby 1714a) But his response was that an easy explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity had defeated men of the calibre of William Sherlock, George Bull, Robert South, Ralph Cudworth and others and there were numerous books on the subject including Samuel Clarke's recently censured work. Whitby's answer was to 'hold fast the orthodox faith, and live in expectation of a full, clear and ample confutation of all the Doctor [Clarke] hath or can say against it'. He also asserted that Church doctrines should be beyond discussion, and accepted by the people as simply as the ten commandments, the catechism and the sacraments. For Whitby, the danger was that 'you will be got into a dark and endless labyrinth' of theology. He preferred to 'look upon this, as the generality of Christians do, as a great mystery, rather to be adored than curiously enquired into ...' The core of Whitby's case, like Markland's, was that enquiry into doctrine profited no one (Whitby 1714b). For Whitby, peace and tranquillity in the Church was best achieved by a simple acceptance of the orthodox and traditional doctrines of the Church (Gibson 2001). Markland, however, went beyond Whitby's avoidance of controversy in denouncing the human experience as inherently imperfect and therefore dangerous.

Markland's views on the frailty and impermanence of human views on religion and politics were uncommon for a number of reasons. Firstly clergy felt their adherence to high and low church positions very keenly and few could restrain their desire to support one side or the other. Secondly the temper of the eighteenth century became more strongly influenced by enlightenment ideals of sincerity of belief and reasonable enquiry after religious truth. Clergy

were as much prey to the view that they had a duty to seek the truth between competing religious and political views. To teach congregations that Church doctrines should be passively received without rational consideration was both unsatisfying and unconvincing. In a world in which Newton, Locke and Hoadly were advancing ideas of rational Christianity compliant and docile Christians were fewer in number. Thirdly the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century witnessed the growth of the Pelagian optimistic view that the end of all society was the happiness of mankind and that this could in part be achieved by intellectual and theological pursuits. In contrast, Markland's pessimistic view of the fragility and danger of human thought

and teachings seemed counter-intuitive. Thus Markland found himself isolated in a theological *cul de sac* that refused to engage with the ideas of the times because of the pessimistic view that all theological enquiry would come to naught and obscure divine truths. It is not known how Markland's congregation in the cathedral responded to his sermons. Probably, given the infrequency with which they heard such teaching, they had little impact, especially as the rest of the chapter of Winchester were either convinced high or low churchmen and determined to advance their cause. But Markland's sermons show how one clergyman exceptionally responded to the turbulent religious and political circumstances of the period.

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