

## THE KING WHO DISMOUNTED

Christmas Day

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Thursday December 25<sup>th</sup> 2014

Just on the very northern edge of London, between the old market town of Enfield and the overgrown Hertfordshire village of Cheshunt lie the manor and grounds of Theobalds (Tibbalds) House. It has a fascinating history. William Cecil, later the Marquess of Salisbury owned it and King James I coveted it. Eventually they swapped estates, Cecil and his successors taking over the royal demesne at Hatfield House and the King thus assuming ownership of the manor of Theobalds. Later on, in the late nineteenth century it gained new fame as the site for the re-erection of Temple Bar before it was brought back to the City of London just ten years ago as the St Paul's gate to Paternoster Square. I remember the arch in a sad decayed state at Theobalds in my youth.

Not far to the south west of Theobalds is an ancient country pub – just on the edge of the Whitewebbs Estate – now much modernised and a good watering hole for a pub lunch. It's still recognisable as the successor of an old wayside inn. Now, early on, in the seventeenth century an itinerant tinker, trading his wares, village to village, hears that King James is to be in that part of the world one afternoon during his travels. The tinker hopes that his luck will hold and that he may gain a glimpse of the King as he comes that way.

As the afternoon wears on, various other travellers pass by and the tinker asks of the King, but no-one has seen or heard of the royal presence. Later on still a hunting party comes by and draws to a halt in a clearing of the forest of Enfield Chace, which was the royal hunting

demesne. Now, with this crowd on horseback, the tinker tries again. Addressing one of the horsemen towards the front of the party, he asks: ‘The word is that the King may pass this way, has anyone sighted him so far?’

The horseman dismounted and invited the tinker to join him in tandem on the saddle. ‘Come, join me here and I promise to take you to the King. We shall be stopping at an inn and he is sure to be there. You will know who is the King, for he will be the only one with a hat upon his head.’ The party galloped for a mile or two and stopped as promised at the inn. The entire party dismounted, including the tinker himself.

Looking around, our itinerant tradesman saw that everyone had taken off their hats – all but one, that is. The man on whose horse the tinker had ridden wore his hat still. The tinker fell to his knees and the King embraced him warmly inviting him to come with them into the inn for food. That little inn, to this day retains the name that that incident gave it. It’s called ‘The King and Tinker’.

Now, hopefully I can unfold to you without too many more words what that rather delightful story has to tell us on this most wondrous of mornings – perhaps you’ve already got it. In the story, the King – the man with ultimate power still in early seventeenth century England – dismounts his horse, offers the humble tinker a mount, embraces him and even offers him dinner, if you’ll excuse the pun, to ‘crown’ everything. It is a gratuitous display of humility, of the King coming among his people, and of divesting himself of power.

That is the essence of what we celebrate today. Each of our readings prepares us for this. Isaiah’s prophesy looks to a new world. The Lord comforts his people, brings good news and through a suffering servant figure. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in our second reading himself uses Old Testament images. He quotes from the psalter: ‘In these last days he has

spoken to us by a Son.’ The words describe someone of power and majesty who comes in weakness. Then, in the marvellous, resounding words of the prologue of John’s gospel, we hear:

‘He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.’

Here, then is the breath-taking essence of the incarnation. The one who creates the universe, who sustains all that is – that same God comes among us as one of us. God dismounts the great steed of his creation. God comes in humility as *one of us*. God appears as a helpless babe. St Paul puts it, memorably in his letter to the Philippians: ‘being found in human form, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.’

It *is* breath-taking news. Perhaps one day you will be travelling out of London and drop in at that inn? If you do, you’ll remember the story of the King, but hopefully too it will trigger in your mind and in your heart, that news which brought new hope to all humanity - God *dismounting*, humbling and emptying himself to be part of our own humanity. As St wrote in his great Christmas hymn:

‘Let every age adoring fall,

Such birth befits the God of all.’

Amen

### Readings

Isaiah. 52. 7-10.

Hebrews. 1. 1-4.

John 1. 1-14.