

## A virtuous woman

20 9 15

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers  
of your people who call upon you;  
and grant that they may both perceive and know  
what things they ought to do,  
and also may have the grace and power  
faithfully to fulfil them.

Our text may be found at the start of today's reading from the Book of Proverbs, chapter 31 verse 11 but in the Authorised Version of King James, 1611:

**'Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies ?'**

September 29<sup>th</sup> – which falls this year on a Tuesday – is Michaelmas, the feast of St Michael and All Angels. Here, in Brittany, the Archangel Michael has a special place in the heart of folk with the legend of Mt St Michel as part of our local culture. The monastery, on an island close inshore on the Normandy–Brittany border, had been plagued by the devil till the monks, praying to the Archangel Michael, had their prayers answered when the devil was forcibly ejected by him from the monastery and thrown across the bay of Mt St Michel to land undignified on the upper slopes of Mt Dol.

It is a site I would visit with my pupils from Dame Alice Owen's School when I used to do trips to Dinard here over twenty years ago. But, as Owenians, Michaelmas

had another significance – the 29<sup>th</sup> September is the date we celebrate the foundation of our School in 1613, two years after the first publication of the King James's Bible.

One of the things I've achieved as your priest here in the last nine years is to write the history of the school to mark its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013. Printed in China, lavishly illustrated, the 256 page book tells the story of one Alice Owen née Wilkes who had an extraordinary escape as a twelve-year-old girl. Daughter of a local inn-keeper, Alice was walking in the fields around her home in the village of Islington on the outskirts of London with a servant when she had an irresistible urge to milk a cow – whatever ! – and as she rose from the milking stool, task accomplished, by chance a stray arrow, carelessly shot from the next field where they were practising archery, pierced her stovepipe hat ! Shocked, surprised, grateful, the youngster promised God that she would do something for the poor if and when she was in a position to do so as a mark of her gratitude for her lucky escape from injury or death.

Half a century later, having married and widowed three husbands, a Brewer, a Mercer, a Judge, having given birth to a dozen children only four of whom had survived to adulthood, Dame Alice Owen was a rich widow and she entrusted some money in her will to her first husband's Livery Company, the Worshipful Company of the Brewers of London to be the Trustees of a school for thirty poor boys and almshouses for ten widows from the parishes of Clerkenwell and Islington.

So why was Dame Alice Owen so generous ? The key lies in part to part of the sermon that the Revd Simon Barnes preached to us a fortnight ago at the beginning of September – a verse from the Epistle of St James : ‘**So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead.**’ (2 v17) The verse echoes the one I’m more familiar with from the same epistle; ‘**Be doers of the word and not hearers only**’ (1 v22). Alice lived in a time when Christians were motivated to do acts of charity to help the poor. Instead of endowing a chantry to have masses sung for the repose of her soul Alice established a school to educate the children of the poor and almshouses to shelter widows. Her good works were a sign of her good faith.

Many pupils over more than four hundred years, both boys and girls, have benefitted from her act of Christian love. For Dame Alice, Christianity was not simply a question of faith but also a matter of good works.

In death, of our life, will we be able to say the same ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew’s, Dinard*

*20<sup>th</sup> September, 2015*

G: Sermons 32 : Virtuous woman

