

May I speak in the name of God, who is creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. Amen.

‘But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill-offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.’

I’ve been reading the college statutes this week, and wondering recently what might happen if William of Wykeham decided to come back from the dead and make a surprise visit to the foundation he established 634 years ago? He might chide a certain law fellow for keeping a dog, since he felt that his poor scholars should not give their bread to animals. He would almost certainly censure the dean and his opera company for leaping and dancing in chapel. We would all get a stern talking to for our conduct over dinner: Wykeham directed that his scholars should dine in silence, listening attentively to a reading from the Bible, and that they should return quietly to work or bed afterwards, because lingering after dinner was known to cause buffoonery, immodest speech, backbiting and scurrillity. I would, of course, earn the sternest disapproval of all: Wykeham insisted that, for the sake of propriety, members of the college should be entirely male, even the servants, with the single exception of a washerwoman ‘of such age and general appearance that she can neither ... fall into any disrepute or merit any suspicion whatsoever.’ I think I can safely say that if he saw me Wykeham would think his foundation had declined beyond repair.

Thank goodness, then, that some things have changed. Wykeham’s quasi-monastic society, where everyone attended mass daily and the undergraduates went straight to bed after supper, was probably never possible even in his own time. And this is perhaps surprising, because in many other ways Wykeham was a ruthlessly practical man, someone who would not have been out of place in the modern world. From origins that were neither desperately poor nor especially rich, he worked his way up from being a parish priest and clerk of works to some minor royal estates, all the way to the highest offices in church and state: Bishop of the fabulously rich see of Winchester and Royal Chancellor. Along the way he made his fortune through some very dodgy practices. At one point he was simultaneously rector of two parishes, prebendary in eleven cathedrals, Archdeacon of Lincoln, warden of the royal forests, royal councillor, and Keeper of the Privy Seal. Of course Wykeham didn’t *do* all of these jobs: he simply pocketed the substantial income from and left the actual work to a junior on a tiny stipend. At the same time, Wykeham outdid modern financiers by speculating in royal tax revenue, using his close contacts at the court to redeem royal debts that had been sold at a discount. If we were to cast his story today, Wykeham would combine the most hated characters of modern times: he was both a corrupt politician and a ruthless banker.

What a strange inheritance: a man who had taken as much as he could throughout his life, of power and money and influence, at his end gave it all to found a society of sober and virtuous poverty, dedicated to the ideals of learning and service. It has been suggested that if Wykeham wasn’t a good man in his lifetime, then perhaps he became one in his end; perhaps his foundations of Winchester and New College were a way of making amends for his own ruthless greed, by giving away all that he had accumulated and by his own careful stewardship ensuring that his power and wealth could do good for many generations to come. But I’m not sure that I believe that. I’m not sure that Wykeham’s story is that simple. After all, he envisioned both his colleges praying daily and perpetually for his soul. Even in death he would continue to benefit. Our foundation was not a purely selfless act.

I'm not sure, though, that I would want a saintly founder, one that we could commemorate without any qualms. I think there is great value in having a founder whose life is as much of a mix of good and bad as Wykeham's, as much of a mix as our own. If we are really pretty negligent, these days, at living up to Wykeham's ideals of poverty and sober living, we continue to strive to use the founder's legacy as best we can to enable deserving students to devote themselves for a time, if not for a lifetime, to learning and service. In the end, the question that seems to have dogged Wykeham in his career of wealth and power is the same one that presses on us daily in this wealthy and powerful institution: how do we tame our desire to have and have more again, and learn to use what we have been given for the good of all God's children? When it is almost overwhelmingly tempting to put myself and my own first, how can I learn to let others take a higher place?

In the end, I think William of Wykeham's grace is that he saw in his poor scholars of Winchester and Oxford the good men he had not himself been. May we, in time, be worthy of his legacy, and mindful of the true source of all that we have been given.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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