



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**8 March 2020: Said Matins with Hymns**

**The Second Sunday in Lent**

**Proverbs 12:13–22, Ephesians 4:25–32**

**The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology**

**‘Freedom of Speech and the Duty to Temper it with Charity: the example of Lucius Carey, 2nd Viscount Falkland’**

The end of last month saw the launch of the Free Speech Union, of which I am a director. The foundation of the Union is a response to various threats posed to freedom of speech in the current cultural climate. Whether such threats are real or imagined is controversial: writers for the *Guardian* tend to think that they are the fruits of the anxious imaginations of beleaguered conservatives. I think that’s wrong, and I think that the threats are real. You will have your own opinions, and I’m not going to use the pulpit to argue my case. However, I’m going to assume that we all agree that a legal right to freedom of speech is very important, even if we differ about where to draw the line and what kinds of speech should not fall within the right. It’s important because it allows unfashionable truths to be spoken and fashionable untruths to be called out. And, less dramatically, it’s important because it enables us to learn from, and perhaps be corrected by, unfamiliar, even unwelcome points of view.

Granted that a legally protected right to free speech is important, Christian ethics has an important qualification to make: the legal right is not enough. This is because, while the legal right allows the truth to be spoken and untruth to be exposed, it also allows untruths to be spoken, truths to be distorted, unfair caricatures to be fabricated, nasty insinuations to be inserted, and gratuitous insults to be made. In other words, the legal right allows all manner of moral abuse. So, the right and its freedom are not enough; we also need the virtues that enable us to use them well.

That is why, although the Bible has nothing at all to say about a legal right to free speech, it has a lot to say about controlling the tongue. It knows how much damage the abuse of freedom of speech can cause. Thus, our first reading from the Book of Proverbs tells us, “Evildoers are trapped by their sinful talk . . . . The words of the reckless pierce like swords”.<sup>1</sup> Instead, both readings urge us to put away anger, and to be wise, prudent, and

charitable. “The prudent overlook an insult”, says Proverbs, “the tongue of the wise brings healing”. And the Epistle to the Ephesians adds, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander”; “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen....”.<sup>ii</sup>

Moral injunctions are helpful in bringing to mind what we should and should not do. But flesh and blood examples are much more powerful in inspiring us to become the kind of people who are capable of doing what we should. So, let me introduce you to one of my heroes. He was short man with a high-pitched voice and wrote B-grade poetry, but he had a great gift for friendship—and he’s a saint in my private Anglican calendar. Although there is a statue of him on the left as you walk through St Stephen’s Hall to the Palace of Westminster, it’s almost certain that none of you will have heard of him. His name was Lucius Carey and he was the 2nd Viscount Falkland. He was born in 1609 or 1610 at Burford Priory and he was educated at St John’s College Cambridge and at Trinity College Dublin. After a bruising quarrel with his father, who disapproved of his marriage, he left to fight with the Dutch against the Spanish in the Netherlands, but returned shortly afterwards to the estate at Great Tew, about twenty miles north of Oxford, which he had inherited from his maternal grandfather.

During the 1630s Falkland built up a considerable library and kept open house for literary, philosophical, and theological folk who would regularly troop up from Oxford—among them the playwright, Ben Jonson, and the political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. And of a summer’s evening, they would walk and talk in the walled garden that still stands.

The core of those whom Falkland gathered around himself shared a common set of values and attitudes. The ‘Great Tew Circle’ (as they later came to be called) were much disturbed at what one of them, Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, termed “the brawls which were grown from religion”. In response to these ‘brawls’ between Puritans and Laudians, Falkland’s Circle identified itself with the Christian humanist tradition stemming from Erasmus and Richard Hooker. They championed the use of reason in matters of religion; they followed St Paul in distinguishing between fundamentals and *adiaphora* (or matters indifferent), advocating tolerance on the latter; and they looked for the reunion of Christendom.

Falkland's pacific nature, and its Christian witness, is well captured by his close friend Clarendon, who wrote of him: "in all those controversies, he had so dispassioned a consideration, such a candour in his nature, and so profound a charity in his conscience, that in those points, in which he was in his own judgment most clear, he never thought the worse, or in any degree declined the familiarity, of those who were of another mind; which without doubt is an excellent temper for the propagation and advancement of Christianity".<sup>iii</sup>

And here is Falkland himself writing in his discourse, *Of the Infallibility of the Church of Rome*:

... it is plaine, that [the emperor Constantine] thought punishing for opinions to be a mark, which might serve to know false opinions by.... I am sure Christian Religions chiefest glory being, that it increaseth by being persecuted; ... I desire recrimination may not be used; for though it be true, that Calvin had done it, and the Church of England, a little (which is a little too much)...., yet she (confessing she may erre) is not so chargeable with any fault, as those which pretend they cannot, and so will be sure never to mend it; ...

I confess this opinion of damning so many, and this custome of burning so many, this breeding up those, who knew nothing else in any point of religion, yet to be in a readinesse to cry, *To the fire with him, to hell with him...* These I say, in my opinion were chiefly the causes which made so many, so suddenly leave the Church of Rome.... If any man vouchsafe to think, either this [discourse], or the authour of it, of value enough to confute the one, and informe the other, I shall desire him to do it ... with that temper, which is fit to be used by men that are not so passionate, as to have the definition of reasonable creatures in vaine, remembering that truth in likelihood is, where her author God was, in the *still voice*, and not the *loud wind*....

Late in the 1630s Falkland got himself elected to Parliament, where he became one of the most prominent and eloquent critics of King Charles I's arbitrary government and a consistent defender of the rule of law. Nevertheless, when civil war began to loom, Falkland was reluctantly persuaded to side with the king and eventually became his Secretary of State. Since King Charles and his Privy Council were based in Christ Church and Oriel College during much of the Civil War, it is probable that Falkland worshipped in this cathedral, and possible that he even sat in your seat.

In the early stages of the conflict, Falkland and other members of the Great Tew Circle were involved in several, secret, politically risky initiatives to reconcile king and parliament—but all in vain. Conscious that his peace-making reputation was being mistaken for cowardice, Falkland made a point of putting himself at the very front of battle. Nevertheless, in 1642 at the end of the battle of Kineton (better known as Edgehill), about 10 miles north of Great Tew, Falkland interposed himself between his own victorious royalist comrades and a group of sorry parliamentarians, to stop the former slaughtering the latter.

As the war dragged on, Falkland became steadily more despondent. Come the autumn of 1643, Falkland could see no prospect of peace, and wished no longer to witness his country's agonized conflict. At the first battle of Newbury on 20 September, telling his friends that “he was weary of the times, and foresaw much misery to his own country, and did believe he should be out of it ere night”,<sup>iv</sup> he placed himself as a volunteer in the first rank of Lord Byron's regiment. He identified a gap in a hedge which was lined on both sides with parliamentary musketeers, and through which their bullets were pouring. He deliberately rode straight at the gap and in an instant suffered a fatal bullet wound to the lower abdomen and died shortly thereafter. From Newbury he was brought back to Great Tew and buried in an unknown location—as recorded by the plaque inside St Michael's Church at Great Tew.

So, Falkland's story had a tragic, earthly end. But his example still lives to inspire. What inspires me was, first, his ability to see right and wrong on both sides of political conflict, and his consequent refusal to buy entirely into either of them. Notwithstanding that, second, he did not flee from the inevitable ambiguities of political life and the strains they impose on a sensitive conscience. He had the courage to enter fully into them, and when he had to compromise and choose one flawed side rather than another, he did not flinch from doing so. For that I admire him very deeply.

But I also admire him for not losing his soul in the conflict. The Christian temperance and charity that he had learned to display in theological and religious controversies, he took with him into his politics—minding his tongue, risking his reputation by striving for reconciliation, and risking his life to protect his enemies from his friends.

So, in our time of political polarization, when I find my own temperance and charity severely challenged, I pray God to grant me certainly, and you perhaps, what Falkland described as “that temper, which is fit to be used by men that are not so passionate, as to

have the definition of reasonable creatures in vaine, remembering that truth in likelyhood is, where her author God was, in the *still voice*, and not the *loud wind...*”.

---

<sup>i</sup> Proverbs 12.13,18.

<sup>ii</sup> Ephesians 4.31, 29.

<sup>iii</sup> John Marriott, *The Life and Times of Lucius Cary* (London: Methuen, 1907), p. 99.

<sup>iv</sup> B. Whitelock.