

SECKFORD ANNIVERSARY EVENSONG

I really must begin with an apology. You could be forgiven for thinking that it is warmer outside than inside the Church tonight. Or that I was trying too hard to replicate the Tudor church experience when, of course, they had no central heating system, or gas boilers! Ours decided to give up just before Christmas, but that said, it is so good to welcome so many of you from our local town of Woodbridge tonight! We particularly welcome representation from the Town Hall and Lieutenancy Office, from Woodbridge School and Seckford Care.

I want to begin with a personal school memory of mine in the early 60s (I'll say) which has stayed with me all this time – when regularly I would have to run around a famous statue on the Green in Woodford, Essex, and in all weathers. It was a statue of a former MP and Prime Minister and a particularly famous one, Sir Winston Churchill. I remember very well too the day of his funeral when the whole school was glued to the black and white TV screen. I also recollect each Remembrance Sunday where I lived when at 11am real guns boomed out to mark the beginning and end of the 2-Minute silence. And in the many years since, I often reflect on how certain individuals, many of them exceptional and some of them controversial, really shaped a particular town or place or nation – sometimes all three.

Thinking of Thomas Seckford who lived next door, who was buried in this very Church, I guess I wanted to celebrate with

you his continuing influence on our town today, not least through the ongoing charitable work of the Seckford Foundation. The best portrait I have seen (with his characteristic Elizabethan hat (not to be confused with Guy Fawkes) and that splendid ruff and beard is to be found... in Miss Norman's study in Marryott House. I said to Shona quite recently, I'll buy that off you, if I may, for St Mary's...and I got an uncharacteristically frosty look. The Lady was not for turning! Hence the smaller version here tonight which lives in my Rectory.

Seckford Street, The Seckford Arms in Clerkenwell as well as on the first floor of Seckford Care, The Seckford Theatre....it doesn't take any tourist long to discover that Thomas was a great benefactor and friend to Woodbridge. We recognise in his very full life a servant of the Crown, at the Court of Elizabeth 1st for some 30 years, a real servant and diplomat in the highest circles we might say - but also quite 'at home' in caring for the poorest in his local community; he had the ability and humility to put his Christian principles into practice and, remember, his growing up was in the tumultuous religious and political circle of Cromwell and Henry V111th. He would have felt the blow, at first hand, of the destruction of the Priory here in Woodbridge...Those of you have been glued to the amazing Wolfe Hall TV series (with one of our finest actors, Mark Rylance), will have got a clear indication that every day was even more dangerous and threatening than living in TV's Albert Square in our own times! I commend to you a little leaflet from Dr Briscoe from

Founders Day back in 1980 which says more about the Seckford history than I can in these few words. They are available afterwards for anyone who wants one. But why we gather here tonight on a special anniversary of thanksgiving is actually more pressing, not least because it relates to the kind of community and town we still want to build upon, as well as cherish. I want to quote from one of our greatest and much missed Chief Rabbis, Jonathan Sacks, in his great book, 'Celebrating life':

"To thank God is to know that I do not have less because my neighbour has more. I am not less worthwhile because someone else is more successful. Through prayer I know that I am valued for what I am. I learn to cherish what I have, rather than be diminished by what I do not have. A third-century rabbi put it simply. 'Who is rich?' he asked. Not one who has much, 'but one who rejoices in what he has'".

Now there's another sermon all on its own! But I quote it because it says more powerfully than I can say, how Thomas feels more like a friend and companion to all of us gathered here tonight. Yes, selfishly, I would like a blue plaque to mark his burial - at the top of the steps as you come down to St Mary's - as I would also like the same for that great abolitionist, John Clarkson buried in our churchyard. I feel sure our Town Mayor can sort all that for us! But until then, let's always cherish these great local people who contributed so much to our common life and who, in small ways and great, inspire us to do the same in our generation. Let us thank God for them in our daily prayers and say with those

memorable words of the Book of Common Prayer which Thomas would have known by heart:

“Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.”

May Thomas Seckford rest in peace, as we say our own ‘well done’ and thank you for his life, his death, and most of all, his faithful, faith-filled, memory and legacy: to this place and this town, we all love and serve?

Amen.