

Easter 1, 2018. St Thomas on The Bourne, Farnham.

A sermon addressed to the boys from St Paul's School visiting St Thomas' this morning.

Thomas said, 'My Lord and my God' John 20, 28.

I don't know how many of you know Bedfordshire. It is one of the smaller English counties with a total population of just over 660,000. It sits a-stride the Great North Road, and the M1 passes through its western fringes. On the East it is bordered by Cambridgeshire; on the West, by Buckinghamshire, on the North by Northamptonshire and on the south by Hertfordshire. From a geological point of view it has a large central section which is flat and is largely heavy clay; to the South-west, around Luton and Whipsnade it has the last outcropping of the Chilterns, and to the North-east the last outcrops of the oolitic limestone of the Cotswolds.

The landscape has shaped its historical industries: so, on the clay in the central belt there were large brick-works; on the Greensand ridge which stretches from Leighton Buzzard to Sandy there were gravel workings; and also on the clay soil, there was a great deal of horticulture, traditionally providing vegetables for the dining-tables of Londoners.

The county was famous during the Second World War for a number of aerodromes, one of which, Tempsford, on the Great North Road, was the airstrip from which SOE operatives flew out to support the Resistance in France.

Just south of Bedford itself is a small village called Elstow. It is not a particularly notable place, except that it was the village where John Bunyan was born. You may know that when he was 16 he fought on the Parliamentary side in the English Civil War. After three years' service he returned to Elstow where he took up his father's trade of being a tinker; in other words, he made and mended pots and pans. He went initially to the Anglican Parish church but left it to join a Non-Conformist meeting in Bedford and became a preacher. When the monarchy was restored in 1660, and non-Conformists had many of their rights curtailed, John Bunyan was arrested and jailed for 12 years, because he refused to give up preaching. Whilst he was in jail he began work on his famous book 'Pilgrim's Progress'...a book which has had a huge influence on English cultural and religious life. Eventually he was released from jail and returned, when the restrictions on Non-Conformists were relaxed, to be the pastor of the Bedford Meeting....it's a church which still exists.

Some of the allegorical descriptions in the Pilgrim's Progress have Bedfordshire connections, so, for example, the Delectable Mountains are the Chilterns around Luton; the strait gate is an image taken from the lych-gate of Elstow parish church.

Well. When I first lived in that part of the world I sometimes reflected on a problem. Did the landscape of Bedfordshire shape Bunyan, or did Bunyan shape Bedfordshire? There was, I discovered, a certain dogged, independent streak amongst many Bedfordshire people...a

streak I actually much admired. I came to the conclusion that it was not Bunyan who had made Bedfordshire; it was Bedfordshire that had made Bunyan.

The hymn we shall sing today: "He who would valiant be" comes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and I can feel much of Bedfordshire in the words...

I have been suggesting in this first part of my address that the landscapes of our early childhood really do affect us, just as Bedfordshire affected Bunyan. I have no idea, of course, which part of the world you might come from, but I venture to suggest that your earliest childhood memories of the place where you spent your formative years, whether you know it or not, will have entered into your soul. But landscapes do not just consist of our outward physical surroundings; all of us have inner landscapes which are shaped by our parents, by our families, our friends and relations, and by our schools.

And now you are in the process of discovering a new inner landscape...the landscape of the Christian faith. You have already made and will, I pray, continue to make a major decision in your lives in which you are committing yourself to following Jesus Christ. It calls for real courage these days to do this...and I have to say that I and everyone else here this morning, admire you immensely for doing so. It is not a small or light step you are taking. You are, as young men, setting out on a pilgrimage into a new and unknown future ... but you will find that wherever you go, Christ will be your closest and most faithful companion every step of the way.

If you look around you today in this church you will see quite a number of elderly, bald and white-haired people, please don't write them off... because the people sitting here have had some amazing experiences on their Christian pilgrimage too: some, as a result of their Christian faith, have had considerable experience of nursing, often in intensely deprived and difficult places in this country and overseas; some have taught in schools in this country and in remote parts of Africa; some have chosen to do youth work; some have become doctors, some have worked for international aid agencies; some have worked in the hospitality industry and in commerce and have tried to bring to those worlds high moral standards; some have served the community through work in the Civil Service or as social workers helping desperately dysfunctional families; some have worked in prisons; some have freely given service quietly and freely to our local community; some have worked with severely handicapped children... As you look around you, just consider what all these people have done in their lives, and continue to do...And now you are setting out on the same Christian road as them. Goodness knows where your discipleship might take you...but let me repeat, the Risen Christ will be with you whatever you do, wherever you go...

When John Bunyan was in Bedford jail he could have had no idea how influential his writings and his experience would be not only among his contemporaries but for centuries afterwards...but I rejoice in his courage, his Bedfordshire indomitability, and his faithful serving of Christ...

As you set out on your pilgrimage through whatever outer landscapes you encounter, may you be a blessing to all you meet, and may you carry with you always, in your inner landscape, the light and the strength and the love of Christ ...

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.