

Nicholas Ferrar and Little Gidding.

These names appear at times in Anglican contexts even in our own times, invoked to encourage an ideal of Christian holiness, a certain style of community life, or to remind us of the unsettled past: I hope to tell you just enough for understanding.

Nicholas Ferrar was born in 1593 younger son of a wealthy merchant, also Nicholas who was much involved with the creation and sustaining of the Virginia Company and Settlement in North America. He went up to Clare Hall (now Clare College) aged thirteen and proved an exemplary scholar of sober habits and unusual devotion. We could imagine him worshipping in St Edward's, in the Clare chapel. Later, he joined his father and older brother John in managing the affairs of the Virginia Company, and life at the Court of King James, but recurring illness took him out of England to travel widely for 5 years in Italy, Germany and Spain, completing his medical training in Padua. He eventually returned to England, working with the family affairs, was ordained Deacon in 1625, and with his widowed mother and siblings and their families removed to Little Gidding in 1626. This was partly to avoid the plague and partly to leave the uncomfortable life of the Court and its political and religious tensions under the new King Charles. The Manor of LG had come into the family as part repayment of a debt to John Ferrar, and when the family arrived they found all in ruin. Old Mrs Ferrar's first action was to have the church cleaned and restored, then they set to rebuilding the manor house. Nicholas was the driving force in establishing the family as a form of Christian community, based on close reading of the Scriptures, particularly those accounts in the Acts of the Apostles of the early church being formed of house groups often under the leadership of a woman.

Life at LG settled into a pattern of daily worship, Bible reading, daily recitation of the whole psalter, care for the poor and needy of the area, with a dispensary for remedies learned by Nicholas in Padua, and a psalm school for local children. The family numbered about 40 persons, with relations visiting frequently, a school master for the children, and visits from friends and acquaintances in London, links which were encouraged as forming a web of friendship.

Nicholas knew the dangers of unrelieved spirituality, and provided occupations such as book binding, needle work, and the preparation of Gospel and other Concordances as well as a discussion group called the Little Academy, on the Platonic model. Nicholas was in frequent contact with his Cambridge contemporary George Herbert, who had also withdrawn from London to serve a small parish near Salisbury. They corresponded about the best way to live in the restored Anglican church, leading to Herbert publishing a book of advice to clergy. George sent his poetry to Nicholas on his deathbed, asking him to either burn or publish it. We are happy that the collection was published.

Nicholas died at 1 am, the hour he used to rise to continue the family prayers through the night, on Advent Sunday 1637, leaving the care of the community to his brother John with the oft quoted words: "it is the right, good old way you are in, keep in it. God will be worshipped in spirit and truth, in soul and body, he will have both inward love and fear, and outward reverence of body and gesture: you, I say know the way. Keep in it."

The concordances were formed by words and sentences cut out from all four Gospels and pasted onto large sheets of paper to form a continuous narrative. King Charles borrowed one of these in 1633, and visited on his way north in 1642 to examine the work in progress of a version for his son Prince Charles. He later appeared at night in 1646 on the run from the battle of Naseby, seeking shelter – John realised that the soldiers would look for him there so led him across the field to another safe place, from where he could continue his journey. TS Eliot refers to this in his poem: 'if you came at night like a broken king'

John and his sister Susanna and their families carried on the life of the community, and the making of concordances, to the great distress of his wife Bathsheba, who alone of the family bitterly disliked the life her husband was pleased to lead, and longed to escape back to London, which she often did. From 1655 John began the composition of a memorial of his brother's life, meeting a need for examples of a good life in the newly established Anglican tradition. He and his sister Susanna died in 1657.

The Ferrar papers came into the hands of Peter Peckard, on his marriage in 1752 to Martha Ferrar, the last of the family. He was Master of Magdalene College from 1781 and prepared a life of Nicholas Ferrar from the enormous volume of papers and letters, still held in the College library, which was published in 1790. This re-awakened interest in this unusual episode in the history of the Anglican church, and inspired many. One of these was a solicitor from Stamford, William Hopkinson, who chanced upon an auction of the estate at LG and bought it in 1853. He cherished the memory of Nicholas Ferrar and his family, restored the church, with new stained glass windows and verses written in various places, including the one over the west door to which Malcolm alludes in his sonnet. "this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

The manor house had long been demolished and its building materials removed, so Hopkinson built a farmhouse and installed a manager. This became the centre of the Community formed in the 1970s, it is now the visitor centre, Ferrar House.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> c J Henry Shorthouse published his novel John Inglesant, which has the hero spending time with the Ferrar community and which aroused even more interest, at a time when the different factions of the religious life of England were again pulling against each other – the non-conformists, the Evangelicals, the Methodists, the Tractarians; the changing social circumstances of the Industrial Revolution and the urbanisation of the population. The Oxford Movement for a revival of the Catholic tradition of the church was later echoed in Cambridge, by a meeting of College Deans and Chaplains, unhappy with the low standards of worship in chapels and churches. They met in St Edward's church at first, and in 1913 went on a retreat to the farmhouse at Little Gidding, where they drew up a Constitution for a brotherhood to be known as the Oratory of the Good Shepherd. They vowed to live a celibate life devoted to life in Community, following the example of the Ferrar family, based in a house in Cambridge, with services held regularly in St Edward's. One of the men, Bishop John How, composed the hymn which we will sing at the end of this service, which recognises their admiration for Nicholas Ferrar and his saintly Gospel-inspired life. The Oratory is now a world wide dispersed organisation, but still commemorates Nicholas Ferrar on 4<sup>th</sup> December, the date of his death. The Anglican prayer book also remembers him on this date.

Many people now know Little Gidding because of T S Eliot's poetry sequence Four Quartets, the last of which bears that name. He visited in 1936, the poem was published in 1942 in the middle of the second world war, when life seemed very uncertain. He describes the church thus:

You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, or inform curiosity or carry report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid.

The Oratory priests were involved in the plantation of a new church in Arbury in 1958 which they wished to name the Nicholas Ferrar church, which was refused so it was called the Church of the Good Shepherd, and has a fine side chapel dedicated to Nicholas Ferrar. I note that Rachel Blanchflower, formerly one of us, is now a curate there.

In the 1970s a lay community was formed at Little Gidding, with daily prayer services and a form of common life, where I lived for two years, appreciating the benefits as well as the difficulties of such an arrangement. Our different strengths and frailties were somehow shared to make a whole greater than any of the individuals. The community disbanded at the end of the century and the premises became a retreat and visitor centre which flourishes still.

There was a service at St Paul's cathedral on the last night of 1999, shown on television, where the last image on the screen was the church at Little Gidding. The Church of England recognises that it is important as the earliest example of the Via Media between the extremes of the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Even at the time the self denial, holiness and discipline of the Ferrar family was unusual, but it is sometimes by exaggeration that we recognise things of value, as in the lives of Saints and Martyrs, or the aid workers of our own time.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Nicholas Ferrar and Little Gidding is the importance of community activity and worship, of doing things together, praying together, sustaining that web of friendship which he hoped might prove a pattern in an age that needs patterns.