

Ps 16:7 (Prayer Book Version) - SABINE BARING-GOULD'S Text

(Sermon preached at Hatherleigh, Devon, 7th September 1980, Norman Hillyer)

Before the old Hatherleigh vicarage was sold, a number of would-be buyers came to view it. One day a lady arrived. 'I'm looking on behalf of a friend up north since I already live in an old rectory myself and know what it's like.' And where was this? 'Lew Trenchard. Do you know it?' I knew who lived there - Baring-Gould. 'That's right. Such a beautiful house'.

One lovely Sunday evening many years ago, Sabine Baring-Gould stood in the porch of the house he had built; gazed across the woods he had planted and beautified with flowering shrubs - to form the setting of a great lake he had created - and turned to his eldest daughter and quoted words from Ps 16: 'The lot is fallen unto me in a fair ground; I have a goodly heritage.'

Sabine Baring-Gould was born in 1834. He died in 1924 at the age of 90. They were 90 years of vast changes.

He was born into a slow-moving world. The horse and the sailing ship were the regular means of transport. Steam was hardly thought of.

1834 was the year of the first workhouse; the year when slavery was abolished in the British Empire; the year when the Sweeps Act forbade boys of 10 being sent up chimneys; the year the Tolpuddle Martyrs (6 Dorset farm workers) were transported for trying to set up Trades Unions.

In 1924, when Baring-Gould died, Ramsay MacDonald formed the first Labour Government.

By that year the Atlantic had been crossed in an aeroplane; the motor car was replacing the carriage horse and challenging the railways; the care of children, the sick and the destitute - once left to private charity - was now recognised as the moral responsibility of the community.

Sabine Baring-Gould was born into the old privileged landowning class. As the eldest son, he inherited Lew House estate (already in the family for 300 years).

His father had an insatiable appetite for travel, so Sabine had under 2 years formal schooling in England. But wandering around Europe made Sabine fluent in 5 languages at 15.

'Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow' is a hymn he translated from Danish.

'The Saga of Grettir the Strong' he translated from Icelandic chapter by chapter to read to boys he taught while a schoolmaster at Hurstpierpoint.

'I have a goodly heritage'. Sabine could thank his father's wanderlust for the opportunity to develop his remarkable gift for languages.

From his mother he inherited something even more precious - a love for folk less well placed.

Their family travels over Europe took them not only to famous cities, but to out-of-the-way towns and villages. His mother - just as naturally as she would have done in England - took a

basket of good things on her arm and systematically visited all the poor she came across in those foreign parts.

When Sabine eventually took over Lew Trenchard he just as naturally took over the care and support of all the folk on the estate.

When he rebuilt farms, cottages and houses he engaged local craftsmen; when he needed ornate gates he quietly approached a young blacksmith who had only ever shod horses, showed him some fine hammered ironwork, drew him a design of the gates he wanted, and left him to gasp at the creative gifts that young man never knew he possessed.

Sabine was for ever seeking to open the eyes of others to the inheritance they had entered upon, and then to develop and beautify that inheritance to pass down to others.

The lot had indeed fallen unto him in a fair ground, but others too had a goodly heritage.

Sabine brought to Lew House a wife whose own story was as remarkable as his, though in a very different way.

Some years before inheriting the estate Sabine was curate at Horbury Brig, Yorkshire. The Parish consisted of canal boatmen, colliers and mill workers who fought, gambled and drank prodigiously. Every man had his whippet for rabbit coursing or his game-cock for cockfighting. Most were illiterate. Few took any interest in religion.

His earlier years of schoolmastering had taught Sabine the value of story-telling. He rented a cottage, opened the ground floor as a night school, made a bedroom into a chapel and offered a hungry parish the 3 R's. The place was soon swamped with eager young people who quickly learnt not to let their teacher close the class before he had told them a story.

Sabine (over 30) noticed a beautiful unsophisticated girl of 16 in that class, fell in love with her and decided to marry her. The way he went about it he revealed in his first novel (one of 40 he wrote - they paid for the work on Lew estate and kept him solvent). That first novel told of the love of a clergyman's son for a poor mill girl. The girl was sent away to a woman relative of the vicar, and educated and trained for her future life.

Needless to say, not one member of either family would attend the wedding which took place two years later after Matins before two witnesses drawn from the congregation.

Grace Baring-Gould emerged as a quiet, self-possessed clergyman's wife, the much-loved mother of an ever increasing family (in all, the couple had 15 children, 14 survived), and finally as the gentle dignified Lady of the Manor of Lew Trenchard.

And what a treasure she proved - running a household of 30 souls and keeping Sabine from his impulsive nature and scathing pen. If he impetuously dashed off a biting letter, she read it and advised him not to post it at all.

While still a boy, and knowing that one day he would inherit the estate, Sabine had resolved to attempt three things:

1. reform the spiritual and moral life of the parish
2. restore the church

3. improve and make comfortable all farms, cottages and houses on the estate.

In 1882 (age 48) he at last entered into his inheritance. By the time he died at 90 he had achieved all three aims.

Church life at Lew Trenchard could hardly be described as a goodly heritage. At his first Easter as rector, there were nine communicants all told, including those from the rectory. He wrote in the Parish Register: 'Behold your house is left unto you desolate until ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord'.

On Sabine's tombstone in Lew churchyard are inscribed the Latin words: *Paravi lucernam Christo meo*, ('I have prepared a lantern for my Christ'). The words refer to his restoration of Lew Trenchard church.

Sabine's grandfather in 1832 (i.e. 50 years before Sabine took over) had (as he considered) 'tidied up' the church for his youngest son about to be instituted as rector.

"Grandfather swept away all the ancient oak pews and magnificent rood screen, and installed deal horsebox pews and a new deal pulpit - all painted bright mustard to heighten the effect - and provided a communion table with blue hangings fringed with yellow. Colours had no liturgical significance but were intended to remind worshippers of God what were the correct tinctures of the BaringGould coat of arms."

Boy though he was, when he first saw it Sabine was disgusted and shocked. On his many trips abroad he ransacked Europe to embellish his restoration. Today, the stained-glass windows, paintings, eagle lectern of gilded wood and magnificent brass chandelier give a subtly un-English atmosphere to a church now recognised as a jewel.

Sabine had prepared a lantern for his Christ, and a goodly heritage for those who, in future, would worship in that church.

With so many years to live, so much energy to expend, so great talents to employ, Sabine Baring-Gould did not restrict himself to the local estate and parish.

Ever more widely he recognised the 'goodly heritage'. Ever more strenuously he laboured to preserve it, develop it and pass it on to others.

Boyhood travels on the continent gave him a love for the past. Great was his joy when he accidentally discovered a Roman pavement in France; great was his disgust when squabbles among the French local authorities led to the find being destroyed.

It is no surprise that he carried on his researches into by-gone days in his own country - mapping, measuring and musing on the past.

He was the first man systematically to explore Dartmoor's ancient treasures. With two enthusiastic friends he walked and rode hundreds of miles to persuade the old Singing Men (his biographer names over sixty he tracked down) to sing almost-forgotten Devon songs while he noted the words (even if sometimes he did edit out the more bawdy bits). On occasions he sang the tune all the way home so that he could record the folk-melodies with the aid of a piano.

'Songs of the West', ed. by Cecil Sharp, a frequent visitor to Lew Trenchard, owes much to Sabine's labours in preserving these ancient echoes of our past.

Small wonder that Sabine gazed with satisfaction at the beautiful estate around him in later years and shared the delighted sentiments of the Psalmist: 'The lot is fallen unto me in a fair ground; I have a goodly heritage'.

He knew it to be an inheritance he owed to those who had gone before him, but an inheritance which brought with it responsibility - responsibility to enhance that inheritance according to the talents God had given him, in order to pass it on to others.

For he never overlooked the fact that the hand behind the inheritance was the good hand of his God, and that it was He who had given him all things richly to enjoy.

At his funeral service they sang his hymns: 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' to which the children of Horbury Brig had marched on Whit Monday 1865; 'On the Resurrection Morning' which comforted Queen Victoria when she lost her husband; and 'Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow'. Then at the graveside where they laid him beside Grace who had passed on eight years before, they sang his children's hymn, 'Now the Day is Over'.

His day was indeed over. The old social order into which he had been born was rapidly disintegrating, its decay much accelerated by the Great War. The old estates were breaking up, manors closing, and traditional values were in the melting pot.

Many of the things to which Sabine had dedicated his life and for which he had fought so hard had become objects of mistrust and ridicule. It was indeed time for him to be gone, to leave a generation that no longer held in reverence the things he knew and loved. His day was over - in this world. But a new day greeted him in the next and he went joyfully forward to receive an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for all who have been born anew to a lively hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.