

Sarah Meyrick speaks to high-profile clergy children about how they were shaped by their upbringing

# A vicarage is for life

**QUESTION:** what do Vincent van Gogh, Admiral Lord Nelson, Denzel Washington, Nina Simone, and the British Prime Minister all have in common? Answer: they are all the children of clergy.

The list of public figures with a clergy parent is long and varied. A quick search shows that a great number of distinguished writers and poets grew up in a parsonage or manse (Jane Austen, the Brontës, John Buchan, Lewis Carroll, Elizabeth Gaskell, Andrew Marvell, Alfred Lord Tennyson).

There are famous architects (Sir Christopher Wren, George Gilbert Scott) and celebrated inventors (the Wright brothers, John Logie Baird), singers and performers (Nat King Cole, Alice Cooper, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Marcus Mumford, Katy Perry, and the DJ Tim Westwood); and international sportsmen (the rower Matthew Pinsent, the golfer Danny Willett) who all grew up in clergy homes.

**T**HE one constant seems to be the steady stream of politicians. Gordon Brown was a son of the manse, although he rarely spoke about any more than his "moral compass". Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, is the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. There are many more: the former US presidential candidate Ted Cruz, and the US Secretary of State under George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, to name but two.

The Prime Minister, Theresa May, often refers to herself as "a vicar's daughter". Whereas David Cameron described his faith as a "bit like the reception for Magic FM in the Chilterns: it sort of comes and goes", Mrs May told listeners to Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* that her faith was "part of who I am".

In one of her first interviews as PM, she told *The Sunday Times* about her father's spending one Christmas Day visiting a bereaved family, while Theresa and her presents had to wait. The faith that she grew up with, she implied, had instilled in her an understanding of "the right thing" to do.

Her Easter message then contained the call for us to remember certain "values": "the values that I learnt in my own childhood, growing up in a vicarage. Values of compassion, community, citizenship. The sense of obligation we have to one another."

Some are suspicious of Mrs May's regular references to her vicarage upbringing. "My objection is that she makes use of it as if this gives her the moral high ground," John Crace, a political sketchwriter for *The Guardian*, says. His father was also a vicar. "It's the way she drops it into conversation: it comes across as less about her faith and more about making political capital."

**F**RANCIS HABGOOD, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police and the son of a former Archbishop of York, Lord Habgood, is unsurprised that so many clergy children go on to be public servants.

He recalls a conversation with his father when he was considering joining the police: "His first reaction was surprise that I'd changed my mind: until then I'd been intent on becoming an engineer."

"But, on reflection, he said that it was not that surprising. He could see similarities [with his calling]: working within the community, supporting people, caring about justice and truth. He could see that the values were very similar."

Mr Habgood's predecessor as Chief Constable, Sara Thornton, was also a vicar's daughter; and he says that this lineage is not uncommon in policing. "When I talk to new police officers, I talk about policing values and the importance of understanding our personal values. That all ties in within the Code of Ethics and the standards we aspire to."

There are "great parallels" between the values of the police and the ones he grew up with, he says. Each of his three siblings also went into public service. "To be perfectly honest, I didn't know why I wanted to join the police at the time, or what attracted me. It just seemed the right thing to do. My father was the first person who made me recognise the link in values and ethics. And, as I've spent more time in policing, I've often reflected on that."

**T**HE actor David Tennant, whose father was a Church of Scotland minister, has said that "being a minister is sort of like acting, and my dad has always been very supportive." He told *The Guardian* a couple of years ago that he was sure that religion had shaped his character, and also that he still goes to church occasionally.

"I think there's a moral compass, but whether that comes from religion, or just from being a good person, and where one starts and the other begins," he said. "I'm a good person, I hope. But I'm never as good as I want to be, never as nice as I want to be, never as generous as I want to be."

The actor and comedian Hugh Dennis, whose father was Bishop of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich, also suggested that "seeing my dad effectively standing up on stage every week and dressing up" had an influence on his chosen career in acting.

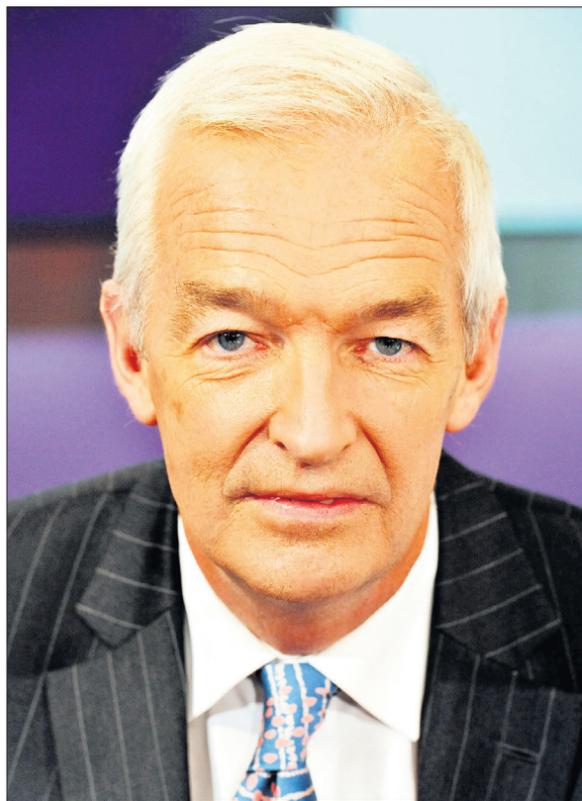
But the key thing that he took from his upbringing was that people were just people. "My parents never worried about status," he has said. "Quite often I would come home from school, and there would be a tramp — a gentleman of the road, as existed in the early '70s or late '60s — sitting having a cup of tea and a sandwich in the kitchen, chatting to my mum. This was a standard thing, that you looked after everyone."

**F**RANCIS HABGOOD was eight when his father became Bishop of Durham. "It seemed quite normal to me then, living in a castle. It is, when it's the only thing you've known. But there are expectations — not only from your peers, but your teachers, that you would do the right thing. It was not a particular problem for me, though at times it felt like a burden."

The theologian and wife of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Jane Williams, has confessed to hiding the fact that her father was a bishop when she worked in a fish-



Cut from the same cloth: the Prime Minister Theresa May; the broadcaster Jon Snow; and the actor David Tennant are all children of clergy



finger factory in Hull. He was self-employed, she said — "so not actually a lie".

Mr Habgood points out that the weight of expectation was probably no less for his own children. "They have grown up as the sons of a senior police officer during their teenage years. There is an expectation. I guess 'Habgood' is an unusual name; so people do make that connection."

Mr Habgood goes to church, but "not terribly frequently". "The most important thing is the values," he says. "I think you can have Christian values even if you are not necessarily going to church."

Others describe their experiences less positively. Mr Crace, whose father had been in the Navy before ordination, says, "I went from having a dad who was never around to one who was always around, and I quite liked that. But being a vicar's son is isolating in many ways. I was kept at arm's length by the other children, who didn't know how to deal with you. I felt it was a career where it does become loaded with what the vicar's wife and children should be like, and I resented that."

Mr Crace's two sisters are still churchgoers; he is not. As well as strong principles, he thinks, "you could argue I took from [my parents] that a career should be a vocation rather than simply being driven by straight economic or societal norms."

**J**ON SNOW, the veteran Channel 4 broadcaster, is someone else who was not always comfortable with his father's calling. His father, though never a parish priest, was a school chaplain, and later a headmaster, who became Bishop of Whitby when his son was 12.

Mr Snow says he grew up with "all sorts of things taken for granted", such as attendance at church and school chapel. Another given was prayers before breakfast, to which all members of the household came. "Everybody — the cook, the handyman, the gardener — came in for morning prayers, and all stood in order of precedence. I didn't think it odd at the time."

As a chorister at the Pilgrims' School, Winchester, he did not question belief in God. "I would say that the combination of my father, and being in the choir full-time, left me unquestioning about the existence of God and the structure of society that the Church tells us about. I didn't enjoy the bits from home, but I did enjoy the bits from school. My father's faith was not very interesting to me."

The most formative experience came when he volunteered with VSO after school. "When I went to Uganda, I had never been out of the country or on an aeroplane," he says. "Looking north from the south, I began to question everything." He believes that this, together with the experience of working for three years in a day centre for homeless youth, shaped his outlook.

These days, he still goes to church with reasonable regularity. "I go once every fortnight or so," he says. He enjoys the contemplation, the peace, the hymns, and the community. "I can't say I am a devout believer. I like the music and the smell of the place and the rote. I am agnostic. I don't have the faith I had as a child that was imposed on me, but I like the bells and the smells and the songs."