

13 October 2013

Jeremiah 29.1.4-7; 2 Timothy 2.8-15; Luke 17.11-19

The Strictly Come Dancing season is now well underway and the world divides over the continuing leading role of Bruce Forsyth. I have to say that as far as I'm concerned he should go on as long as he can keep standing. His jokes may not be great but I love the whole spirit of kindness that he generates. If any couple look as though they're wobbling in their confidence he will whisper in their ear – so that 10 million of us can hear it – 'you're my favourite'. And you know that some weeks he says it to all the couples but somehow you still believe it. It's a ministry of kindness.

But saying 'you're my favourite' to every competitor isn't always a good strategy and can be disastrous. Take our saint for today, for instance, Edward the Confessor. He was king of England from 1042 until 1066 and had a reputation for indecisiveness. When it came to naming his successor he took the Bruce Forsyth approach. When William of Normandy came to visit in 1051 Edward liked his Norman style – 'you're my favourite', he whispered in his ear. But he was later to say the same thing to Harold Godwinson - and the rest, they say, is history.

'A saint,' someone once said, 'is someone whose life hasn't yet been researched properly' - and, to be honest, a bit of research into Edward's life and the reasons why he was proclaimed a saint 100 years later seems to bear that out. What we remember Edward most for was also a result of a good deal of dithering. He had made a vow to go on a pilgrimage to Rome to St Peter's tomb but felt so insecure in his kingdom that he never felt it was safe to go. So he did a deal with the Pope by which his vow was commuted and he built a monastery dedicated to St Peter instead – and so began the building of Westminster Abbey.

But even then he had mixed motives for what he was also building was a suitable place for his family line to be buried. Where you were buried mattered a great deal to our forebears and the building of many of minster churches of the Saxon period was probably financed in part by the desire of the great and the good and the great and the not-so-good to have a decent place to be buried.

But let's leave Edward for a moment and wind the clock back to an era when the building of minsters or monasteries was part of a movement of genuine spiritual renewal and a seeking after God through prayer and the religious life. Friday was St Ethelburga's day. Ethelburga was a royal princess who, like our own Etheldreda of Ely founded a double monastery – that is, a community for men and one for women, living separately on the same site but sharing in worship and ruled over by their founding abbess. The Venerable Bede, writing about 70 years after her death said that 'none who knew her holy life could doubt that when she departed this life the gates of her heavenly home opened at her coming.' He also writes of the many signs and miracles wrought in her abbey at Barking. One of these occurs at a time when the plague had struck down a goodly number of the male community but hadn't as yet reached the women. Ethelburga may have been a woman of faith but she knew that her women were next in the firing line, but it's interesting what seemed to concern her most about all of this. Over to Bede:

When the sisters met together she took to asking in what part of the monastery they would like their bodies to be buried and where they desired a cemetery to be made when they were snatched away from the world by the same catastrophe as the rest. Although she often enquired she received no definite answer from the sisters, but she and all of them received a most definite reply from the

divine providence. On a certain night when the servants of Christ had finished their mattin psalms, they went out of the oratory to the tombs of the brothers who had already died. While they were singing their accustomed praises to the Lord, suddenly a light appeared from heaven like a great sheet and came upon them all, striking such terror into them that they broke off the chant they were singing in alarm. This resplendent light, in comparison with which the noonday sun seemed dark, soon afterwards rose from the place and moved to the south side of the monastery... There it remained for some time, covering that area until it was withdrawn from their sight into the heavenly heights. SO no doubt remained in their minds that this light was not only intended to guide and receive the souls of Christ's handmaidens into heaven, but was also pointing out the spot where the bodies were to rest, awaiting the resurrection day.

Notice that like the early Christians in Rome they went to pray at the tombs of their departed brothers – here, in the middle of the night. The early Christians had to go out of the city for this for all Roman burials throughout the empire were by law outside the city wall. So the early Christian martyr of Verulanium, Alban, was buried outside the city and later generations honoured the place of his burial by building an abbey over it. I used to live there on the road to the old city of Verulanium which was later abandoned and is now a park; the new city, St Albans, built up around the abbey so that ironically Alban's grave is now in the city. The Christianisation of Saxon England led to a great cultural change about burials. In this city the early Saxon burial sites are in clusters by the roads out of the city, outside the city wall, but later Saxon burials are always in churchyards – like Ethelburga's brothers and sisters snuggled up to their church buildings, the church triumphant alongside the church militant, one Communion of brothers and sisters.

In our gospel reading the lepers, being unclean, stayed at a distance. SO it remained in our city and throughout Christian Europe, with the difference that our Christian society provided a hospital for them and a chapel which still stands on the Newmarket Road outside of the old Cambridge eastern fields of Barnwell. But if leprosy still carried its unclean stigma, death did not. 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel', wrote St Paul. The risen Jesus is the gospel – death is defeated, it has lost its sting. A graveyard holds no fear for us; this is no dark and unclean, hostile territory. It's a dormitory where our brothers and sisters sleep for a while until the trump shall sound. 'If we have died with him, we will also live with him.' Bringing the dead in from the nether regions is a declaration of faith. They don't belong out there but in the communion of saints we are bound together. They are not far away.

Reading and researching the history of our parish and of the whole of Cambridge and indeed of our English history from the time of Ethelburga to the time of Edward the Confessor I am struck by the mixture of sanctity and sinfulness, like the wheat and the tares of the parable, inseparable. There are periods in the history of Christian England when your heart sings at the holiness and there are periods when one is embarrassed by the wickedness of it all. There are times when the church has needed to withdraw from the world to rediscover its holy calling and there have been times when it has been called to work alongside the world for its greater good and prosperity. The people of Israel had a similar story. One moment Babylon is the great whore, the awful evil monster but at another Babylon is a place to make friends with and to look after – hence Jeremiah's words: 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' That attitude to the host city was inherited by the church who followed the same model – we even took the word 'paroikia' used by Israel to describe itself when it

was in Egypt – it literally means ‘living alongside’ and is used of foreigners, non-citizens, living alongside the resident population. Paroikia is the word from which we get ‘parish’, the place where we live and where we must learn both to seek the welfare of the city but also to maintain our citizenship of another country, a heavenly one. Historical research now suggests that before Chesterton became a parish in its own right it was part of an area including Cambridge served by a minster church on the site of the castle in front of the Shire Hall. Over a period of two hundred years stone coffins, grave slabs and memorials have appeared or been dug out of the site adjacent to the old castle gatehouse that later became the prison. This strongly suggests that that was where the church of our forebears was before the extensive planting of churches in villages began from about the tenth century. Underneath castle hill are the graves of the villagers of Chesterton from Saxon and early Norman times. And, I just discovered recently, some of those grave slabs – ones dug up over 300 years ago were then moved into our churchyard and are still here today, binding together their generation with ours. They are decorated with the cross, but in a form that speaks of the resurrection, for they are floriated crosses, bursting into flower, for that is the gospel, 2000 years ago, 800 years ago when they were first laid down, and today.

‘The saying is sure: if we have died with him, we will also live with him.’