

900 years: the Reformation

Dedication Festival, 14.7.09

A sermon preached by Nick Moir

When Jacob realised that the place he had been sleeping had been a place of divine encounter he did a striking thing. He took his pillow which was a rock lying horizontally, and he turned it so that it was vertical, the pillow became a pillar or a standing stone, and he consecrated it – that is, he poured oil over it and gave it a new name, Bethel, House of God. There seems to be a universal human instinct that marks the transcendent with something that points upwards, that lifts your eyes upwards. In Jacob's dream it is a ladder with angels climbing up and down it, and perhaps behind the dream are the Ziggurats of Babylon, and the pyramids of Egypt, staircases for ascending into Heaven and for Heaven to come and visit the earth. We still have pillars in our churches which soar upwards and lift our gaze and on the outside of churches such as ours we have spires, architectural signposts that point upwards.

500 years ago here the main religious object of devotion and the principal liturgical act of devotion were both there to lift the eyes of worshippers upwards. The object I speak of was present in every single parish church of the land, it was the focal point of each church building, it was high in the air, so high that it required a special staircase, and platform to get to it so that candles could be lit at it. It was dramatically veiled during the season of Lent and unveiled again on Palm Sunday, a

week before Easter. It was the Rood, a medieval word for a cross or crucifix. You can see where ours was because it's left a kind of ghostly shadow on the Doom painting.... staircase and loft. During the course of the 16th century, when much of today's liturgy and music was composed, our predecessors were made, under act of parliament, to take down the Rood and destroy it, along with all the statues that populated the nooks and crannies of this place – dozens of them, scores perhaps. If you look at the fountain, possible that surviving remnant of a Madonna and Child, used as rubble at some point, since re-emerged. The figure of the crucified Christ towered over this place, his arms reached out to allcomers, his wounds and his eyes moved those who saw them to pity, to sorrow for sins and to repentance. The scene of the last judgement set before the late medieval a stark choice: to the right, from Christ's point of view, stands St Peter welcoming the righteous into the eternal city with its fair pavilions and splendid company; to the left are the unrighteous who face the fires of judgement. Such scenes are not much to the taste of modern sensibilities, but I think that it's vision and even intention is magnificent and one day I hope to do a fuller exposition, but to say more now would be to lead me astray from the point – which is that the medieval s experienced their faith through seeing: the beautiful, the grizzly, the shocking, the piteous, the dramatic, the still. They saw salvation in what they saw as a house of God, a gate of Heaven. But the real Heavenly vision was not to be seen by looking up there, but through there – and inbetween was a screen, not a wall or a partition but

something that was pierced regularly so that you could see through it but still recognise that that space was beyond you. The word chancel comes from the Latin for lattices, cancelli; what you see through the veil, as it were, was heaven; what was going on with the priest at the altar was like a re-enactment not just of Good Friday and Easter but of Christmas, the Word becomes flesh, the bread becomes the body of Christ and after the priest had uttered the words he raised up the consecrated host and everyone first of all saw the elevation, the high point both literally and spiritually in the medieval Catholic Mass. They looked up and they saw salvation and then they knelt until communion in adoration.

A hundred years later all had changed. The rood had gone, the walls were either whitewashed or covered in symbols or abstract design or words. So Mary is covered by the Ten Commandments. And so a religion that was about seeing became one that was about reading and hearing. The Reformation was only possible because of a revival in learning – and in particular in the study of the written word. It was the blossoming of the University – and of similar institutions around Europe that led to a return to the original text of the Bible. Greek was relearnt, the established Latin translation questioned, St Paul was read afresh, the invention of the printing press was bringing learning to a much wider audience, literacy was increasing. The English language was finding its feet and could rival the scholarly Latin in its ability to convey truth with precision and beauty. Christianity could at last become fully English as there came into being a language that could be both ours and

heaven's. And so thanks to William Tyndale and others and to the new printing presses, an English Bible could be placed in every parish church that the people could read (or at least more of them could) and understand. And thanks to Thomas Cranmer, Miles Coverdale and others they were able to worship in a language they understood. As on the Day of Pentecost they were now able to hear, each of them, in their own native tongue. And the central piece of furniture in this new Church of England was no longer a stone altar or even the wooden Communion table that replaced it, or a rood or cross, but a pulpit from which the word was preached..... it has moved....

For half of the 900 years worship here was in Latin which was reflected in what the choir led us in a month ago. For all but the last few decades of the second half of our history worship has been as today, in the words of the old Prayer Book and with readings from the Authorised King James Version of the Bible. In their beauty and expression these have been unsurpassed and we still use them at our 8am service and Mattins and Evensong are still used regularly here. But the last Yorkshireman to speak thees and thous has died out and neither do poets choose to express their noblest sentiments in Elizabethan English. In reading Scripture and using liturgies that are written in contemporary English we are surely doing the right thing but we have also lost something in the process. It is simply not possible to write liturgy in modern English that has the beauty, dignity and subtlety of Cranmer's and Shakespeare's language. To me that is a loss. But on the positive side I think it is beginning to make us work harder at reconnecting with

our older tradition of valuing the visual and symbolic. The Christmas tree cross, the tree of life and the fountain have been deliberate attempts to do that, in some cases actually inspired by rediscovering the practices of our medieval forbears. If the Reformation's triumph was to rediscover the Word then perhaps in our churches the word needs to become flesh again so that we might see his glory.