

Easter 7, 13 May 2018

John 17.6-19

The Catacombs of St Callixtus along the Appian Way on the outskirts of Rome once held the mortal remains of half a million Christians from the 2nd to the 6th centuries including sixteen bishops of Rome and fifty martyrs, including St Cecilia now best known as the patron saint of music; we know next to nothing about her life but we do know that she died as a martyr some time in the second century before Christianity was accepted by the Roman empire. It used to be thought that the catacombs were the secret places of worship where during times of persecution the early Christians gathered and celebrated the Eucharist for fear of being discovered. In fact it is now thought that they went there to honour their dead. All Roman burials were outside the city walls until the establishment of Christianity as the state religion. And they had a strong belief and sense of the communion of all the saints, living and departed; praying and sharing the Eucharist at their graves was a way of celebrating that communion, of realising it. For those Christians death wasn't something morbid and alien to be kept outside the walls of the city and community. No, it was just a gateway to the life beyond and to the worship of Heaven. So when the Romans adopted Christianity the dead entered the city, literally: the dead were buried in and around the churches so that relatives and fellow Christians didn't have to go outside the city to be in Communion with them but they were right there beside them all the time. And the martyrs who were especially venerated and honoured? They brought them in. As they built new churches they were placed underneath the altars so that they were literally at the heart of their prayer, worship and celebration. Pre-eminence of course was given to the apostles, to Peter and Paul. Go deep enough under the high altar at St Peter's in Vatican City and you will come to what really may well be St Peter's tomb. It has been a centre of Christian pilgrimage since at least the third century. For our Christians forebears the physical remains of the apostles and saints weren't just bits of old bone but had sacred significance. However you understand it they were physical links to the person remembered not just as a figure in history but of one who is alive to God – and alive to the eye of faith and to those who put their trust in things eternal.

For us Protestants, brought up on a Blackadder approach to relics and aware of all the medieval abuses, superstition and fraud – to us this is an alien world and a part of Catholicism we may find least congenial.

But, like it or not, it was a part of mainstream Christian faith from the early centuries until the Reformation. It was part of the mindset of Augustine and his companions who were sent by Pope Gregory to re-ignite the faith amongst the pagan Anglo-Saxons who had taken over this land in the middle of the first millennium. What did he send with that missionary band?

all things in general that were necessary for the worship and service of the church, viz., sacred vessels and vestments for the altars, also ornaments for the churches, and vestments for the priests and clerks, as likewise relics of the holy apostles and martyrs; besides many books.

Yes, there were books; that pleases the Protestant heart and indeed it's part of what Jesus is teaching his apostles in the upper room. 'The words,' he says, 'that you gave to me ['you' being God the Father whom Jesus, God the Son is addressing in prayer] I have given to them, and they have received them.' The Christian faith is communicated, transmitted, through words, teachings, first given orally by Jesus to his disciples who received them, learnt them, interpreted them, retold them, eventually – some of them – wrote them down. Until the dawn of printing these texts were lovingly copied and sometimes beautifully adorned with illustrations that made the word flesh again for people as they could see what the stories were telling. Amongst Augustine's missionary kit was, of course, the famous Gospel book that now lives down the road in the Matthew Parker library at Corpus Christi College. From that book the gospel was first told to King Ethelbert of Kent and the conversion of England began.

But to those missionaries another essential part of the kit were the relics. It was as though to bring the apostolic faith here you didn't just bring the message, you brought the apostles themselves. It could even have been Augustine's band that brought the relics of St Andrew that as well as inspiring church dedications to him in neighbouring Rochester (where the ancient cathedral is dedicated to Andrew) and up and down the country including, of course, here – as well as that they could be the relics that ended up on the east coast of Scotland and gave the name to what became until the Reformation the church capital of that kingdom – their Canterbury – and one of Europe's main pilgrimage centres.

Let me tell you the story of Godric. He was born in about the year 1065 in Walpole, Norfolk (where they now have great flower festivals). He was from humble stock but was a bit of a self-made man, first as a pedlar, then as a sailor and entrepreneurial merchant. His story is told by Reginald of Durham, a contemporary, who knew Godric well.

In his various voyages he visited many saints' shrines, to whose protection he was wont most devoutly to commend himself, more especially the church of St Andrew in Scotland, where he most frequently made and paid his vows. On the way thither, he oftentimes touched at the island of Lindisfarne, wherein St Cuthbert had been bishop, and at the isle of Farne, where that Saint had lived as an anchorite, and where St Godric (as he himself would tell afterwards) would meditate on the Saint's life with abundant tears. Thence he began to yearn for solitude, and to hold his merchandise in less esteem than heretofore....

And now he had lived sixteen years as a merchant, and began to think of spending on charity, to God's honour and service, the goods which he had so laboriously acquired. He therefore took the cross as a pilgrim to Jerusalem, and, having visited the Holy Sepulchre, came back to England by way of St James [of Compostella]. Not long afterwards he became steward to a certain rich man of his own country, with the care of his whole house and household. [After a while] he begged to be dismissed and went on a pilgrimage, first to St Gilles and thence to Rome the abode of the Apostles,....

On his return from Rome, he abode awhile in his father's house; until, inflamed again with holy zeal, he purposed to revisit the abode of the Apostles and made his desire known unto his parents. Not only did they approve his purpose, but his mother besought his leave to bear him company on this pilgrimage; which he gladly granted, and willingly paid her every filial service that was her due. They came therefore to London; and they had scarcely departed from thence when his mother took off her shoes, going thus barefooted to Rome and back to London. Godric, humbly serving his parent, was wont to bear her on his shoulders....

He then chose the life of a hermit and lived in Finchale in County Durham on the River Wear, where his usual isolation was interrupted by a stream of visitors seeking his wisdom and guidance including reportedly Thomas Becket and the Pope.

John's gospel was probably written when all of those or nearly all of those in that upper room had died, mostly as martyrs. When Jesus says 'For their sake's I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth' he may be talking of his death and theirs. He is praying for them as he prepares to send them out to do his work and share his word, just as he had been sent out by the Father to fulfil his mission. 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.' And just as the world was about to turn on Jesus and engulf him with its injustice and cruelty, so he says 'the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.' Those apostles, those first to be sent out, would continue to have a special place in the church throughout the world. Where they could not go in their lifetimes their mortal remains would sometimes go after their deaths and travellers would scour the seven seas to visit them in their shrines and pilgrim destinations. That was some motivational speech Jesus gave the night before he died. It sealed the deal for his disciples and friends; following the confusion and disarray of Good

Friday they regrouped and remembered. They waited on the Spirit and they went out in boldness, sent to the corners of their world, telling the story, passing on holy, Spirit-soaked words, pointing people all the time to Jesus who was the centre of everything, the word-made-flesh and the way to the Father and inspiring new generations to live and die for him.