

Pilgrimage to Canterbury

In Sundays in Lent I'm talking a little about Pilgrimage. Two weeks ago we thought about the pilgrimage people made to the Promised Land and last week we made a trip to Agen, the place of St Faith's Martyrdom. The Promised Land as such is not a place which is easy to define, it was more a destination than a place. And Agen, well you'll know now what happened there but still it might not be clear where that city actually is.

But you will have probably been to Canterbury, it may be a pilgrimage you have already made. We know it as the place where, for the last 1500 years, the most senior bishop in England has had as his church. I don't know what it means to God, but it's also a world heritage site – so it's up there with the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids and the Taj Mahal. When **you** need a priest you phone me. When the nation needs a priest, it phones the Archbishop of Canterbury – he's the man to call on when the community of Christians in Britain needs a priest at times of crisis or celebration. Which is what his successors have been doing for three quarters of our country's Christian story. But how did that come about.

A quick resumé of Christianity in Britain. There are legends to suggest that Joseph of Arimathea brought Christianity here or even that St Paul himself did it – but neither of those are likely. Most probable is that the faith came here with traders, merchants and travellers as much as it did with missionaries. Although Britain under the Romans was very pagan, there were still Christians, Christian communities and Churches. But because Romans didn't like Christians there were also martyrs. The first known martyr in Britain, St Alban, was killed in the same year as St Faith was in Agen, the year 304. And as with St Faith in Agen, martyrs were hugely important in not only developing the faith, but in giving confidence to communities to build churches and communities around them.

When the Emperor Constantine in 313 declared Christianity to be the religion of the Empire, British bishops began to play their part openly on the national and international stage. It was OK to be Christian in Britain, but then, as now, there were different kinds of Christians.

In the first 6 centuries the Celtic Church was evangelising with the likes of Ninian, Patrick, Aidan, Columba and others but it all looked a bit too pagan and different for the Pope's eyes, so in 596 Pope Gregory sent Augustine to sort us out. He was a kind of Ecclesiastical European Commissioner for sorting out the Brits! Poor chap, what a job. But it was something of a second Roman invasion, this time a Christian one instead of a military one, and not so much to convert Britain, but to try to contain and organise its national and cultural faith.

In the 7th Century, the Synod of Whitby set about organising an increasingly Christian Britain according to Roman customs. So whilst it was the Celtic

missionaries that had by that time done the bulk of the work, the power now lay with Rome which is where it stayed for the next 900 years until Henry VIII said 'thank you very much, we're going alone', (only without the 'thank you very much').

And for nearly the last 500 years there has been a Church of England; but in that time there have come a whole range of new, changing and reforming churches, Methodists, Baptists and more recently the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians. And Wales and Scotland have a disestablished Church. Sometimes I chuckle when I hear Anglicans say they don't want the church to change – because change is what the church has always done.

But if there is a focal point for the Church, then that focal point is Canterbury. A focal point for our **state** religion would be Westminster Abbey, but sometimes we have to disentangle the church from the state, and the place where that happens is down there in Kent. It's close enough to the channel to be at the meeting point with mainland Europe. It's close enough to London to connect with matters of state when it has to, but it's far enough away so as to distance itself when it needs to and that's been important throughout our history. When Kings and Queens and when governments have got it wrong that little bit of separation has been very important. Or when the church has got it wrong, it has often been because it has acquired for itself too much power, or because it has cosied up too close to monarchs or governments.

Around 20 years ago, Portsmouth Diocese made a pilgrimage to Canterbury. Some people walked or cycled but the biggest single group went on a specially chartered train. There is of course a link, our own Cathedral is dedicated to Thomas of Canterbury, but the pilgrimage went there not least because if our Cathedral is the mother church of the diocese then Canterbury represents the grandmother church, the place which has, since the church began to get organised, kept an oversight of all that it is and all that the church seeks to be.

From pagan Christians and Celtic Christians into Roman Christians. From Roman Christians into the Christians in Britain who, in the 16th Century, were reformed, and through the massive changes and transformations of the last 500 years to what the Church is at this moment. The Church, the body of Christ has always had to be reformed, until today when we find ourselves to be the Body of Christ which is still just as much as in need of reform as ever before. A pilgrimage to Canterbury is I think about a church which knows how much it has changed in 2000 years and that it must still change and reform for every age to be a church of the present and not the past.

As a pilgrim Christian what would you say needs reforming now? How should the Church be today to cope with the world in which we live? I'll leave you to discuss that and drop me a note, but I'd argue for a more

decentralised church, a church with less cumbersome structures and government; I'd argue for taking our bishops out of the House of Lords and to put them back more prominently in their cathedrals, their dioceses and their communities; to give them back their role of oversight, of pastoral care, teaching and preaching in their Cathedral Churches.

And whilst Canterbury Cathedral is no longer a monastic community it is still a place of pilgrimage and what it does well and most beautifully is the daily offices of morning and evening prayer. Evening prayer each day is wonderfully sung and, at the heart of its daily prayer, are the psalms which of course includes the psalm we said this morning as part of our Lent journey.

Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in his own Cathedral in 1170 would have known these words:

'Hear my prayer, O God;
Give heed to the words of my mouth.
For strangers have risen up against me
And the ruthless seek after my life.
May evil rebound on those who lie in wait for me.'

And,

'Behold, God is my help'

These are the words of the wise person who recognises human frailty and the foolishness of the world, of the power hungry, of the dependence on celebrity and tabloid mentality of cheapening our culture to the lowest possible level. They are also the words of the wise person who recognises the foolishness and the frailty of the Church and its need to change to live.

And they are also words which Jesus knew and if we are to be the Body of Christ in the world today, then these are words which we should get to know more deeply to know our own frailty, the frailty of our Church and the need to recognise God as our help. A pilgrimage to Canterbury is about a church which is willing to confront itself and to reform in every age.

Let us pray:

Hear our prayer, O God; listen to our words. Reform and renew your church to be the Body of Christ in the world today. Amen.