

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

**Sung Eucharist on the feast of All Saints**

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Thursday 1st November 2018 at 6.05pm

The niches in the Gothic buildings of our land are mostly empty. One of my predecessors, John Joseph, appointed here by the reforming Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (who perhaps ironically has a date in the Anglican calendar of saints – the day of his being burned to death) – Joseph was a commissioner for the king's reforming injunctions and we can be pretty sure that he caused many a statue of a saint to be removed from its niche and destroyed. The Mercers' Company, across the street buried an extraordinary figure of the dead Christ which is dated to the early decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and hence is a remarkable survival of what Joseph and his colleagues longed to be destroyed.

If you aren't moved by the destruction of most of medieval English art, you will be alert to the reformers' argument that what they were destroying was an occasion for idolatry – the worship of something other than the unseen God. The Reformation saw the valuation of the Old Testament as normative as the New and statues were seen to be in contravention of the second Mosaic commandment against idols. It is not a caricature of pre Reformation religion to imagine that, in part this may well have been true. No such caution was displayed here after the Second World War and each of the arches of the nave can be seen to display the head of one of the people most closely associated with the Rebuilding completed in 1964. There's a bishop up here and a predecessor of mine over there – but nobody has as yet pressed the case of their sanctity.

But if there is cause for empty niches, yet in the Gothic idiom architects continued to build with niches and to leave them picturesquely vacant. The detail as design triumphing over function. Occasionally and bravely new statuary has been introduced into niches and notably in 1993 at Westminster Abbey – pictured. But the saints sculpted are not the respectable apostles of Jesus or distant English heroes of faith, or even those associated with the history of the Abbey itself, but rather twentieth century martyrs of the faith. Oscar Romero the murdered archbishop of El Salvador was lately canonised by Pope Francis (odd that the Church of England should get there 25 years before); Janani Luwum, murdered archbishop of Uganda under the tyrant Idi Amin would have known London well together with the counsels of the Anglican Communion and the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, a nun who derived some of her inspiration I gather from a visit to a parish served by Anglican religious sisters in Exmouth Market, is a great aunt of the Duke of Edinburgh.

When this church was rebuilt one might have thought that instead of the talented and worthy of the demanding project, they might have considered possible saints associated with the building and parish. And they would not have had to look far. Mention has already been made of Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury and patron of the parish who was burnt at the stake at the outset of the reign of Queen Mary Tudor. Equally every archbishop from Lanfranc in 1081 - when we were founded – to today will have known this building as part of their close jurisdiction and one would hope for a saint or two among them. Anselm assuredly (intellectual, austere and courageous and Lanfranc's successor), Thomas Becket

(perhaps the most venerated martyr of the middle ages and born on the other side of Cheapside – I came across a little church dedicated to him in Salamanca and built only five years after his murder at Canterbury; he would have known this place doubly well), William Laud, (a saint in the eyes of many who as Archbishop lost his life to Parliament in the reign of Charles 1), and perhaps William Temple (social reformer and ecumenist who died in office in during the Second World War).

But if sanctity is, in this sense, near too hand; this does not comprehend a proper sense of what we celebrate today. The empty niches had their purpose because they testified not just that veneration of the saints was not in itself and by itself some backdoor to salvation; but rather that sanctity is the vocation of every Christian soul. Partly this is the slow refinement of prayer, worship and works of mercy in a life's journey (what we do and what is done to us) – it is intended that we should be more like Jesus; some are so marked that we name them saints. But it is also that each Christian is called into a community – which is not just the temporal church defined by buildings and current demands but rather a communion of persons marked at baptism and confirmed by faith and service. The church of today may be benighted, compromised, marginalised and quite unrecognisable to those whom I have listed – but its connectedness to the entire communion of saints is in reality its guarantor and its lifeblood.