

## **A sermon preached at St Peter's, Grange Park, London N22**

*Dedication festival and the feast of All Saints*

Sunday 4th November 2019

The Revd George Bush, Rector of St Mary-le-Bow

Although a dedicated religious tourist – be it basilica, mosque or oratory; I would not have enjoyed the Temple in Jerusalem. At the time of Jesus it was pretty much a building site, being rebuilt in an ostentatious classical idiom by the Herods – a particularly obvious example of them sucking up to the Romans. But the liturgy was the same as it had long been. There were two daily services in the Temple, and a third in the afternoons of the Sabbath, the New Moon and festivals. Additionally this was a place of personal and family recourse with offerings for sin and thanksgiving. The smell must have been appalling for animal sacrifice was the hourly norm. The Talmud, the ancient source of legal interpretation, says that at one feast 600,000 pairs of kidneys were immolated; but less convincingly that there were (miraculously) no flies. It was not like Evensong; but it was very rigorously patrolled as to ritual – trumpets would blare (this perhaps the most distinctive sound) and cymbals would crash, the people would prostrate themselves and the Levites would sing the psalm of the day (actually just like Evensong).

We have no right to assume that Jesus objected to sacrifice; his protest today may well have been occasioned by the fact the Roman coinage was idolatrous and could not be used in the Temple; but that money changers charged such exorbitant sums to exchange to Temple coinage that the poor wanting to buy an offering were mercilessly fleeced. The importance of the Temple was also that in legend it was the place where God created Adam and where Abraham was required to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Our churches are not temples or even synagogues – a movement to handle increasingly dispersed Jews which took shape around the time of Jesus. This church of St Peter was not built for a particular known group of Anglicans in 1941, but – and with a rare confidence in a future which must have looked dicey – to serve the entire community which lived here. Famously the Church of England is for those who are not members.

Getting out of an organisation we now know is not without hazard. The French – perhaps not my most tactful opener on this day - in places, I believe are said to have a process at Town Halls whereby individuals who have been baptised in infancy can register to have the effects of baptism removed – in a sense become 'unbaptised'. The imagined offence is I guess not a distaste for the advantages of Baptism (which remain real and tangible in some jurisdictions – access to schools, rights to marry or be buried) but that baptism was secured in infancy and therefore circumvented consent.

The Church of England is arguably in a more sensitive position because, although we rejoice to baptise infants and adults we are not strictly a membership church. Indeed those who live in this parish enjoy common law rights to marry and be buried from here which are quite antecedent to their actual confessional position. The Vicar would be expected, according to Christian rites to marry a Hindu and a Muslim if they so wished – though I admit that to be supremely unlikely!

And the Church which to you will look like a voluntary organisation is in fact more like a public body with some unusual responsibilities (not least the maintenance of historic buildings) and legal exemptions (in the areas of sexual equality and marriage). I even believe that I cannot be arrested when on my way to conduct public worship – a privilege I have yet to exercise. A corollary of all this is that we sometimes have to decline requests for people to be married from those who do not have the required qualification. I vividly recall a bride on the telephone asking if she could ‘book the church’ for her wedding and when I explained that the normal lawful method would be by worshipping here for six months she – and after a pause – simply explected, ‘What, these days?!’ and hung up!

We are in the season and octave of All Saints’ Day which is a celebration both of status and of grace; it is not just about the individual sanctity of those who have gone before us, but it is a celebration of the faithfulness in which we stand and which is our task for our age. I don’t imagine that many of us aspire to sainthood in the conventionally understood sense; although we are increasingly aware of Christians who experience disadvantage and persecution for their Christian faith or culture. Their experience is assuredly the coinage of our faith; it provides a perspective to our comfort and ease.

But faithfulness is not measured in blood, pain or in zeal but in the conversation, as that seemingly new saint John Henry Newman would assert, that each generation has with the knowledge, enthusiasm and purpose of its day. This conversation may be full of confidence in Christian doctrine and precedent but must be open to new insight and the prospect that Grace may abound in surprising places. A closed conversation would, to my mind be faithless.

And faithfulness – the desire to divinize, to make godly the times in which we live – also requires us to keep faith with the people. Yet to my mind the silent attrition of recent years has been that the Church is no longer the place where grief and bereavement are ministered. I suspect that the average undertaker is likely to favour a secular celebrant, malleable to family wishes, readily available and with few other responsibilities. A generation ago a curate might have been expected to conduct two funerals each week and the Church, which accorded status to all God’s beloved, was cast close to the pastoral reality of communal and family life. No more.

And the same seems to be happening to weddings; or rather that fewer are getting married at all, be it secular or ecclesiastical. This is especially saddening since in marriage in church the ministers are not clergy but the bride and groom; they enjoy the status and they mete the Grace.

We Anglicans are only beginning to realise that the typography has altered beyond our imagining; we are like a nation that has lost its Empire. But that is not enough of a reason to loose heart. So for my purposes All Saints is not solely a celebration of those of the baptised who have gone before us marked with courage, love and devotion –oddly I think their example can only take us so far for their worlds are as foreign as their battles; but also a celebration of, as the poet Edwin Muir has it, ‘the fields of charity and sin, Where we shall lead our harvest in’. All Saints’ is ours, if we but read the signs of the times and have the imagination to see the signs of the dawning of the kingdom.