

Gateways to Heaven

Installation of Canons Wakefield Cathedral

Sunday 29 April 2007

How many of you, I wonder have read Gerald Durrell's book *My Family and Other Animals*? It is a marvellous read and is set against the canvas of the Greek Island of Corfu. Let me offer you just a few snatches. They refer to a journey into Corfu town:

'We noticed the town was more crowded, more boisterous, even than usual. The streets and squares were packed and we were almost knocked over. "I think there must be something going on," said my sister Margo observantly. I asked an elderly peasant woman near me what was happening. "It is Saint Spyridon, sir," she explained. "Today we go into the Church and kiss his feet." Now Saint Spyridon is the patron saint of the island and once a year his mummified body is carried in procession round the town. He is very powerful and can do a number of wonderful things for you if he happens to be in the right mood when asked. Inside the Church it became evident that, like it or not, as a family we were going to kiss the newly embroidered slippers on the saint's feet. "Tell Margo not to kiss his feet – let her kiss the air – not the feet – a most unsanitary procedure," said mother!'

Fairly exotic stuff, then, and integral to the ecclesiastical calendar in Corfu. Now in contrast to that, at that more local shrine to an Eastern saint - St Helen's Athersley - all this talk of Saint Spyridon is positively mundane and run of the mill. Canon Rodney Marshall, will I know, given the right moment, describe some of the religious culture of his part of Barnsley Deanery, which you may feel leaves Corfu and Saint Spyridon standing!

But even so, Father Rodney does not have a monopoly on the exotic, in the Diocese of Wakefield. Travel just a few miles to the northwest and you will encounter another centre where the worship is anything but dull. It is rather different from Athersley but equally rich. For this time it is Kevin Partington who presides at Dewsbury Minster - minster itself means a centre for wider Christian mission. And such exotic variety is not confined only to the clergy either. Move still further west and just a little south you arrive at the School of Music at the University of Huddersfield. The school is now one of the most highly esteemed music departments among the universities in Britain. There, alongside playing the organ at Honley Parish Church, Professor Michael Clarke will introduce you to some of the most exotic electronic music the world has so far known.

Now, you might be forgiven - having begun with Saint Spyridon's carpet slippers and arrived - via a most engaging journey, at computer-generated dissonances and harmonies, we are this evening simply here to celebrate the exotic.

That, however, only touches half of our story. Let me return you to the world of Greek Orthodoxy where we began. There is a most significant word which emerges from that world and which describes what we really are about in this service. That word is *sobornost*. Few of you will have encountered it unless you have been involved in ecumenical work between Anglicans and Orthodox. For the association which has pioneered such work for almost a century now, the Fellowship of St. Alban and St Sergius, calls its journal and newsletter by that very name, *Sobornost*.

It chose that name because *sobornost* means catholic. Indeed it is the word used to translate catholic in the Nicene creed. And *sobor* itself means council, gathering and is often used too as a word for cathedral. So *sobornost* is catholicity and by extension a cathedral or *sobor* is a place which brings together all the riches of the Christian story and tradition; it is a place of true catholicity. A cathedral is thus indeed also a good place for us to consult. The Second Vatican Council took place in St Peter's Rome, the Papal basilica or cathedral.

Today's readings capture perfectly this sense of universality and catholicity. Remember those beautiful echoing words of Isaiah: 'I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us.' So Isaiah recounts the story of salvation starting from Moses and moving onward, he describes all who were caught up in it. Luke too has Jesus 'opening the minds of the disciples to understand the scriptures.' Again it is the story of salvation. 'They are witnesses of these things,' Jesus says. In each case, the great riches of our tradition are recounted and call out of us our praise – a veritable *sobornost* of love and grace in God.

This evening as Kevin and Michael and Rodney have been made canons, so they have become part of that *sobor*, that council, which enriches the witness of God's people in this part of Yorkshire. They will go on to contribute in new ways to this cathedral and diocese. That is part of what the cathedral is about. All of us gathered here are also challenged more effectively to tell the story of salvation to this generation.

Recently I spent a few days in Corfu, during my sabbatical. Almost the very last encounter was for me the most moving. We visited an Orthodox monastery above the tiny bay of Myrtiotissa, the place of myrtles. A young monk, Father Sophronios, welcomed us in. He was now entirely alone; all his brethren have died. But he still looks to the future and does so with a generous heart. 'You are *very* welcome,' Father Sophronios said, 'Please pray for me – and remember there is only one heaven and it is large enough for all of us.'

That is a true vision of sobornost, and so of heaven, and this cathedral is but one of heaven's gateways.
Amen

READINGS

Isaiah 63: 7-14

Luke 24: 36-49