

## Come Forth and Go Free

### Wakefield Cathedral

Easter Day Sunday April 12 2009

It's amazing what you encounter when you idly surf the Internet. One has to keep one's wits about them! Just a few days ago I hit upon – almost by accident – the Auction Sale Rooms at Bourne in Lincolnshire. It was one particular lot that caught my eye – three large laundry boxes, formerly belonging to the Birkbeck Hygienic Laundry in Enfield, Middlesex. As they came up on the screen it was like a flashback to my childhood. All our sheets, pillowcases and other linen went to the Birkbeck Laundry, which called at the house once a week.

Laundries seem to be rarer specimens than they were then. But clearly they seem to have existed in some form or other when John was writing his narrative of the gospel. In today's gospel we read three times about the 'linen wrappings lying there'. More interesting still, John's is the only gospel that tells us of these artefacts. In earlier and more corrupt versions of the Greek text of St Luke, there is a glancing appearance of these wrappings, but nowhere in modern translations. What are we to make of them? In a way they are rather gruesome items – grave clothes, shrouds, body bags. But the description as linen cloths feels fresher and more encouraging.

Churches are good places to talk about such things, for, in the old exclusive, male chauvinist days we could esteem the women of the sacristy who would launder and starch the altar linen, the clergy robes or whatever. David Scott, a priest in Winchester Diocese and a poet has even written some lines about the surplice, perhaps the linen garment which classically identifies priests of the Church of England. He writes:

'To think so many battles have been fought  
over this four and a half yard circumference  
of white linen. Not just by those who ironed it  
up to the difficult tucks beneath the yoke  
but by Divines wrangling over rubrics.  
For me it is my only finery, by law  
decent and comely; a vestry friend  
put on often in dread; given away  
to old deft fingers to mend.'

So even in Church, linen is an ambiguous commodity. It was rows over 'surpliced choirs' that fed some of the sharpest and most unseemly rows between 'high church' and low church a century and a half ago. But the surplice too is a comforting friend. At a funeral the generous folds of the cloth enveloping the parson offers a comforting picture of one who cares for the harrowed families and friends mourning their loved ones. The white that symbolises heaven and resurrection hope, literally robes the minister. Or, it may be the equally encouraging billowing white garment of a spring day when a young couple are marrying. Scott continues:

'I have seen them hanging in as many ways  
as there have been voices chanting in them  
immaculate in hanging wardrobes; or worn  
with the peg mark still obtruding;  
or chucked on the back seat of the car  
with the purple stole and the shopping.  
We have put these garments on for centuries.  
They persist. We wither and crease inside them.'

So, in an odd but authentic way, the surplice is the priestly identifier, that which marks out ordained humanity. But it also therefore reminds all of us of the special and all the ordinary moments of life; a sign of our everyday God.

But how about John's linen wrappings? They are grave clothes, but the crisp linen speaks of something else too. John, who wrote this gospel (whoever he may have been) carved his words into our humanity, but with the carving chisel of the divine. To use a different image – it is a human narrative etched out in divine ink; almost every sentence has a depth to it that takes us right into the heart of God. So these linen cloths are grave clothes. They make it utterly clear and obvious that this man Jesus was crucified and lay stone dead. But they are also fresh white linen reflecting the white light of resurrection life.

Or, again, rather like our withering and creasing inside those surplices, so too those tightly bound linen wrappings trapped and imprisoned the spirit of Jesus. Interestingly, the cloth around Jesus' head is described by the same Greek word as that used for the linen that kept Lazarus fast bound in death. At the resurrection, of course, they are unwrapped letting Jesus free – another sign of the life. Remember the words of Jesus to Lazarus in that remarkable and dramatic story: 'Lazarus, come forth,' Jesus commands, and then to the bystanders: 'Loose him, unbind him and let him go free.'

John's remarkable, and as ever, ironic imagery can speak with extraordinary directness to our own very difficult world. Somehow we have allowed ourselves to be bound and imprisoned. Even the computer and internet can trap us when its purpose should be to free us. For that on-line world is one of solitary loneliness. Or the amazing consumer world in which we live: designed to offer variety and choice beyond our wildest dreams, it cocoons and binds us in the wrappings of vast retail complexes and stir up desires for more from which we find it difficult to gain release.

More recently the message of an aggressive atheism offers not freedom, but only imprisonment within the binding clothes of our limited humanity. Even last week's *Lewis* on the television had a sort of 'Professor of Atheism' crying for freedom and redemption.

But today is most truly a glorious day. John's narrative, tied together by the humanity of Peter, the beloved disciple, and Mary Magdalene offers us the dawning of a new world. In early times, at Easter, the time of Baptism into the Resurrection, the candidates went down into the font in their own clothes. They emerged in new bright white linen wrappings. The message is still the same but still new: 'Lazarus – and that is all of us – come forth – loose yourselves, unbind yourselves and go free.'

Amen

READINGS

Acts 10: 34-43

John 20: 1-18