

## The Accident of Place

### Friends of St George's Jerusalem

#### Annual Eucharist. Maria Assumpta Centre

Thursday 14 May 2009

About ten years ago, while I was Dean of Norwich, rather late in the day, I came upon the Book of Margery Kempe. I suppose I'd never bothered before that since she was said to be a minor – even an eccentric mystic! Alongside Richard Rolle, Mother Julian, Walter Hilton and the Cloud of Unknowing she is just an 'also-ran'. But I was living in Norfolk and so I thought I'd give the neurotic Margery a try.

It was an eye-opener. What I hadn't bargained for was the peeling back of the centuries, revealing patterns of medieval life in such vividness. Like a child's 'pop-up' book, the fifteenth century town of Kings Lynn sprang into relief and a different and strange world was revealed.

Much more recently, and inexcusably late - remembering my many journeys to Jerusalem - I read John Wilkinson's excellent edition of *Egeria*. It makes amazing reading - about Coptic Egypt, about Constantinople, about Palestine and most of all, of course, about Jerusalem. This season of Easter – and most notably, of course, Holy Week, what she calls the *Great Week*, is revealed brilliantly. It casts so much light upon liturgy and devotion, but also upon theology.

The best I can manage is something on asceticism and self-discipline. So: 'From Easter to Pentecost', *Egeria* writes, 'not a single person fasts, even if he is an apotactite,' I doubt there are too many apotactites here this morning.

Despite running short of evidence on these great fifty days, then, the book does expose so much which, alongside the biblical record and archaeological discoveries, make Jerusalem an enormously rich treasury for the life of our faith. Now it happens that I was reading *Egeria* alongside Allan Doig's scholarly book on Christian architecture in the same period.

He takes us from converted synagogues via the imperial basilicas of Constantine and Justinian into the Romanesque and Gothic periods. We are not allowed, either, to forget about the influence of Islamic architecture on Christian church buildings. But let me return you to Palestine.

Think for a moment about Jerusalem – David, Holy Sion and the Kidron Valley; the Pool of Siloam and Hezekiah's tunnel; the remains of the Temple and the Dome of the Rock; the Cardo and Roman Jerusalem; the pool of Bethesda, Gabbatha, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Calvary; then the later 'four quarters' – Arab, Armenian, Christian and Jewish; finally, the visible and military signs and symbols of our own day - telling of the tragic politics of Palestinian Arab and Jews– all mixed up, of course, with a classical oriental souk.

Here, even on a Palestinian scale, is richness past counting. Something which the Pope has been seeing this past week. This is what St George's has helped to reveal to so many.

But let me revert for a moment to Margery Kempe and King's Lynn. What did I learn from Margery's book? I learnt, of course, of her 'gift of tears'; she cried continually throughout many, many liturgies – she must have been a pain in the neck for the local priest. I learnt too of the holy monks and nuns, of her pilgrimages – even to Rome, Assisi and Jerusalem. But I learnt most fascinatingly of what one might call the contingencies, that formed the warp of the fabric of her life on which the weft was woven.

In other words, the life of faith is always woven upon a fixed and given framework which *we* don't choose. King's Lynn had its merits – it was a port and a rich mediaeval town. But it had too its flaws and its dangers. Set in the maze of rivers draining the fens its propensity to flood was legend. Built largely of wood and stone, fire ravaged it many a time.

So too with Jerusalem. It stands high on a cliff, defensible and with good water sources. But more significantly it stands at a nexus of routes. Strategically Jerusalem and Israel were keystones of the ancient world. Caught between great empires – Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece, Rome, the Seleucids and the Ottomans it became a perennial theatre of war. Out of this emerged Judaism, our own faith and later, to a degree, Islam.

All was rooted in the contingencies of this one fascinating Levantine city of Jerusalem. It is knowing about similar such contingencies – these facts of life in this place - that we have come to value in the work of St George's.

Today we celebrate a different sort of contingency. For we celebrate the apostle Matthias. He is almost the *apostle of contingency*. Without Judas' treachery no further selection would have been needed. Following the train of events, when the process of selection for a new apostle begins it is bizarrely like the national lottery or more depressingly the election of deanery synod representative to the Diocesan Redundant Churches (Uses Committee).

'The lot fell on Mathias' we are baldly told. It hardly feels exhilarating. Who'd have wanted the job, it seems – and especially after Judas' despicable betrayal of Jesus.

But that is just the point. The lives we live, the places we inhabit, even the people with whom we work are largely *given*. They are contingent. It is on this contingent, accidental tapestry *warp* that God will weave his *weft* of faith. It is a faith, which eternally will feed our flourishing and fulfilment. As the gospel passage reminds us, it is all woven on love: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

As we celebrate St George's College and the holy city itself, we offer thanks for the givenness, the contingent, the accidental which form the matrix, the framework for our faith. Ultimately Matthias' was a profound and great calling: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you that.....you should go and bear fruit . This is what I command you,' Jesus says 'to love one another'.

Amen

## READINGS

Acts 1: 15-end

John 15: 9-17