

St Just in Roseland & St Mawes Parish Churches

Building Bridges

Second Sunday after Trinity

Sunday 2nd July 2017

11.00am The First Mass of the Revd Arwen Folkes

Readings: Jeremiah 28.5-9 Romans 6.12-23 Matthew 10.40-42

Each year I go on holiday in Western France not far from the Atlantic coast. One of my favourite places is the little coastal town of Esnandes not far from La Rochelle. There is another ancient medieval church by the sea. It towers above the village – and it is distinguished by the fact that from outside it doesn't look like a church at all. It looks more like a fortress. Where you might expect to see buttresses, there are fortified battlements and bartizans, little turrets which allow you to survey the surrounding countryside. Where you might expect to see glorious stained glass, there are narrow windows, far too narrow for a human being to pass through. They are the sorts of windows out of which you might see a bow and arrow. The entire edifice was surrounded by a large ditch. The whole thing looks like the keep of a Norman castle. It doesn't look like the most welcoming or accessible of churches.

It was built like this in order to protect the villagers from pirates and the English (some of whom were pirates and who regularly staged raids of the French coast). This citadel was a place of safety – and it provides a telling commentary on our understanding of the church. We speak of 'salvation', even 'of being saved', and yet for those villagers the church was literally a place of safety. It was a safe place.

I was also struck by that phrase 'a safe place' when I served in a little church in one of the north Sheffield outer estates some years ago. I used to provide cover there from time to time. When it came to the intercessions, members of the community would offer their own prayers and petitions. One Sunday, Philip the organist prayed for a woman who had been murdered in the house just across the road. The community had clearly been very shaken by this. Philip said in his prayers: 'We thank you, God, that this is a safe place for us'.

The church is a place of safety and security. This is important. But it is worth thinking about what makes a church a place of safety and security. I've been reading a book recently, entitled 'The Benedict Option'. It's written by a very conservative Christian in the United States, lamenting the state of the churches and the way Christian teaching is disregarded and marginalized in a secular state. He talks about Christians withdrawing from mainstream society. Creating little oases of Christian community in the wild and inhospitable desert of the modern world. There is a defensiveness about the book – a desire to manufacture some kind of purer church able to withstand the perils of living in today's world. It's a vision of the church rather like that fortress church in Esnandes. Building walls that are higher and higher. Making sure that the church is set apart.

The paradox of the vision described in this book is that it presents an understanding of the church, which is light years away from Jesus' own ministry. In our gospel reading this morning, the emphasis is not on building walls, but on hospitality and welcome: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous...."

Of course, you can read this story in terms of offering welcome to 'prophets', 'the righteous', church officials. Certainly, early Christians such as Ignatius thought that Jesus was speaking about the kind of welcome you might offer the bishop. Others that Jesus was talking about the itinerant preachers who were commissioned to carry on the work of the gospel. But note that Matthew goes on to speak of 'welcoming one of these little ones'. This is a constant theme of Matthew's gospel, 'the little ones' are the marginalized, the crowds, the lost, the forsaken, the broken-hearted. These are the ones that Jesus draws to himself. As the passage continues, he says, 'Come to me all

who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest...' That doesn't sound like someone intent on building walls. This doesn't sound like someone intent on establishing a fortress or a citadel – but a church which is open and welcoming, and ready to offer compassion and hospitality to those who enter. That little church in Sheffield, that 'safe space' which I described a moment ago was open to the local community every day. It provided the home for a mental health charity. The work was challenging, underfunded, and it was often difficult to shake off the stigma around mental health issues, but it was a 'safe space' because – paradoxically - people had taken the trouble to build bridges rather than walls.

Today is a special celebration because this is the first occasion at which Arwen will preside at the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion. She is now a priest - and I want to invite you to reflect on what it means to be a priest. One of the old Latin words for a priest is 'pontifex'. It's a word which literally means 'bridge-builder'. A priest is called to build bridges. A priest is called to be an agent of reconciliation, an ambassador for Christ, one who seeks to draw together a community. Part of the role of a parish priest is to build partnerships with the local community. And yet, we should never forget that at the heart of this ministry is God's extraordinary gift of love and forgiveness revealed in his Son Jesus Christ.

Yesterday we shared in the joy that Arwen is now a priest of the church of God. This marks the culmination of many years of discernment and preparation. And you might be forgiven for imagining that Arwen has finally arrived. But one of the things that I want to say today is that what happened in Truro Cathedral yesterday, what is happening today, only marks a beginning - because 'building bridges' takes time. Ordination is not about one single moment in the life of a priest. There is something in the life and ministry of a priest which is about the hallowing of time – and this involves a patient waiting. Amidst the baptisms and weddings and church fetes and funerals and PCCs and those endless cups of tea, the priest listens and waits, straining to glimpse the signs of the kingdom of God, longing to see the promise of salvation, yearning for an intimation of God's presence.

And one of the places where I think that a priest becomes most acutely aware of that ambiguous temporal dimension is in moments of prayer. There is a wonderful poem by the Welsh priest-poet, R S Thomas. The title is 'Kneeling':

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak: the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throug
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.

 Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

Thomas is describing the experience of prayer. And one of the things that R S Thomas captures beautifully is the idea that the words we use, even in prayer can never bring about a simple resolution of the complexities and the paradoxes of human experience – as if we can say, 'so that's all sorted then'. We falter sometimes in finding the right words, but then we discover that 'the meaning is in the waiting...' The meaning lies in inhabiting that space between the penultimate and the ultimate, between the temporal and the eternal, between memory and hope.

And one of the places where this becomes most real for a priest is when she presides at the Eucharist. And when we join together to celebrate the Eucharist, we are drawn into this strange dimension, between the penultimate and the ultimate, between the temporal and the eternal, between memory and hope.

At the heart of the Eucharistic prayer are words which call to mind a memory, 'On the night he was betrayed..... Do this in remembrance of me'. And yet the Eucharistic is not simply a memorial of the cross, it is not simply a recollection of a past event. If you study the language of the Eucharistic prayer, you discover that it also points forward to the future. It is filled with the hope and the joy of the resurrection. The Eucharist is a foretaste of the kingdom of God. It offers us a little glimpse of heaven. Building bridges. And it is the task of any priest to stand there at the altar and to re-present that mystery to the people of God not just once, or twice, but again and again and again.

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