

Trinity 5 12th July 2009

'For Herod went in awe of John the Baptist, knowing him to be a good and holy man...'

I've just returned from a clergy conference with the theme 'Sacred Places – Sacred People'. It was held in the North East and it included pilgrimages to the tombs of St Cuthbert and St Bede in Durham Cathedral, where we prayed and were anointed with oils, as well as attending Choral Evensong. But another pilgrimage we made was to Anthony Gormley's road-side sculpture, 'The Angel of the North'. The Bishop of Jarrow, speaking to us the previous evening, had movingly told us of the 'holy place' even this modern secular construction had become. A place where people bring their 'significant others' to declare their love, propose marriage, or bring their partner to announce they're carrying his child. In other words, the 'Angel of the North' has for many become literally the sacred place its name hints at, under which confidences, promises and betrothals are considered safe to be made – even blessed – a place which, like church for many of us, can mark our defining moments and transitions.

I hadn't realised, living in London, that Gormley's 'Angel' had taken on this profound function locally. What it confirms is that, regardless of church attendance statistics, there is still amongst people at a basic level a real sense of 'the holy' and a desire and need to mark important moments with meaningful ceremonies in special places.

King Herod, in the Gospel reading we just heard, recognized the sacredness, not of a place, but of a person in John the Baptist. He was drawn to his holiness – as we've heard, he found John's purity of intention and goodness, at a deep level, very attractive. As with sacred places, we still seem to have a deep-seated need for people of whom we can be in awe, people to look up to. In our Western culture such a person perhaps most readily comes from popular celebrity – look at the adoration expressed around Michael Jackson's death and funeral. Within recent memory Princess Dianna seems to have been invested by the British public as a whole with a love and devotion that, had she lived, might have been hard to live up to. But in her death, it was a though she became the focus of a national grief for so much that had been lost, and for hopes that were unfulfilled. It was a kind of collective cry to God, but without words, or any one conscious meaning.

Whatever popular expression we see of our God-given religious instincts, within true religious faith there seem to be three characteristics that mark holy people and sacred places. Firstly, there's **pilgrimage**. You find yourself seeking the company of Holy people; you want to watch them and hear what they have to say, as Herod did of John, and as Jesus' disciples did (and still do). Long after their death you might visit their tombs to pray as I did this week, or simply walk where they walked, as many do in the 'Holy Land', following the Gospel stories of Jesus around Galilee.

Then there's **challenge and renewal**. The Gospel said of Herod that he liked to listen to John, 'although what he heard left him greatly disturbed'. Real holiness is *otherness* – you don't spend time with holy people, or in sacred places, expecting your comfortable habits and attitudes left unscathed; you can expect to be *challenged*. Herod's moral choices were challenged by John, just as the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was constantly challenged by Jesus.

Finally, after encounter with the holy there's a **sending out**. Holy places like the Isle of Iona are usually small; they can't have many visitors there all at once. I'm told that part of the pilgrimage experience, for those who visit its Christian community there, is a *sending-out* at its end, as the resident members see their pilgrim visitors off, wishing them God's peace and blessing for the journey ahead. Rather than clinging to the sacred meetings we have, we're meant to return home, or travel on, transformed by what we have encountered. Jesus did this to person after person who sought him out; as we heard in last week's Gospel, he send his own apostles far and wide to preach the gospel and to heal; we are sent out after this Eucharist to love and serve him in our daily lives. Because Herod did not respond to his encounter with real holiness – allowing himself not only to ignore but to quench and *destroy* it, in his execution of John – he was haunted for the rest of his life.

As I've already implied, as Christian people we may make special pilgrimages and be blessed by meeting particularly holy and devout people, but we regularly encounter the sacred in the Eucharist. We come together on Sunday – during the week if we are able, to encounter God in his word and in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, allowing ourselves to be changed and challenged, and we are then sent out to love and serve him. We heard, in the 2nd reading today, Paul describing the blessings conferred on us in Christ through our faith in him, saying that we are 'stamped with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit', so that we might reflect back to God his own glory.

From the attention that matters of faith and religion receive in society around us, you might get the impression that what we do on Sunday morning is just a 'nice activity for those who like to be religious'. But we should observe these signs of spiritual hunger manifested by people around us in so many different ways. We should take note that St Paul declares God's purpose to be that 'the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity with Christ'. Then we should reflect on the connection between these two things, and on what we might do to help others to make that connection for themselves.

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