

All Saints' Sunday 2016

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks
Sunday 30 Oct 2016 [year C]

Words from our first reading:

“See what love the Father has given us: that we should be called children of God.”

I've been pilgrimage shrine-hopping this week.

Which seems appropriate, for here we are again with half term behind us, and the clocks changed, and the church's worship taking a gear change - as we head into the season of All Saints, All Souls and Remembrance.

And pilgrimage place hopping?

Well for the last few days it's been a joy to be with Alex Binns (our new Assistant Director of Music) and our cathedral's Ladies Choir, the St Edmundsbury Singers – we've been the visiting choir, leading the services of evensong at Canterbury Cathedral - which of course is home to where the pilgrimage shrine and burial place of Thomas a Becket, St Thomas of Canterbury, used to be. As we were taken on a tour there, one of the important places to stop and pause is at the site, inside the cathedral, of St Thomas' murder, his martyrdom by the King's soldiers. The folk at Canterbury share the same problem that we have! Just as we don't quite know where the body of St Edmund is buried, neither do they know where, at the Reformation, St Thomas of Canterbury's body is.

So that's one pilgrimage place: and - surely I must have a holy glow about me! For this time last week a group of us from the cathedral went to a very different shrine - our annual pilgrimage to the place in North Germany where well over one million pilgrims go each year

to visit Our Lady of Kevelaer (it's good that some of those who went are reading the readings and will lead the offertory in today's service).

The town of Kevelaer is one of our twin towns here in Bury St Edmunds: in many ways Kevelaer has a similar context: it's a similar in size, set in a very rural part of Germany near the Dutch border, with vast agricultural and horticultural lands and villages all around. The 'jewel in the crown' in the centre is not a cathedral - but a basilica - dedicated to Our Lady: a stunning place, with amazing colours on the walls, furnishings and in glass; and like us has beautiful music and liturgy and worship: all of which lifts the soul heavenward.

If you have never been do consider coming on a future pilgrimage there: I liken it to the North German equivalent of Walsingham or Lourdes or Santiago, with groups and pilgrims coming and going all year round.

It's a moving story of how the shrine there came into existence in the mid 17th century during the Thirty Years War, where people came to pray for help and consolation in affliction whether through war or illness or bereavement.

You will know that the Virgin Mary has many titles (Our Lady Star of the Sea, Our Lady Queen of Heaven, Theotokos, Mother of Mercy, and so on). But in Kevelaer she has the beautiful title of *Mary Consolatrix Afflictorum*: “Mary Consoler of the Afflicted”.

350 years on, people still come from all around Europe to seek consolation and help at the feet of the comforter of the afflicted in (as the Shrine describes it) in the presence of Mary who Our Lord Jesus has given us as a mother.

In our present climate with Syria, ISIS, Yemen and the terrible plight of refugees, I felt moved again that Kevelaer is especially relevant

today - right now - that prayers are offered each day for those who so desperately need the loving mother-like comfort of the Consoler of the Afflicted.

As Kevelaer over the years became a religious centre, so too it developed as a centre for the arts: mosaic painting, bronze casting sculpture, gold and silversmiths, stained glass artists. And, of particular relevance to us: candle making workshops. Because each year they make for us in Kevelaer our huge Paschal (Easter) candle along with our Kevelaer Peace and Unity candle which is lit each day here at evensong.

So it was a joy for us to receive those candles at the high mass in the Basilica last Sunday morning: we thought of you as we worshipped there!

Candles of course or a reminder of the Light of Christ – which, at All Saints, we celebrate as shining from us, the household of the Saints of God: Saints living and departed, you and me who make up the church.

For the All Saints and All Souls Festivals have a deep share in the Easter light and mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection: are a powerful proclamation that – through death and darkness – Jesus can transform our lives and lead us to the glory and light described in today's readings – the glory and light of the saints, both in this world and the next. As Christians, whatever darkness befalls us, we know how the story ends, don't we.

Our call to be 'a saint' is about recognizing our need to be transformed: not by somehow withdrawing from the world or renouncing all fun, but through better self-awareness confronting our faults, addictions and habits, and seeking by God's grace to overcome them. And then to be agents of transforming light and love around us, somehow to play our part in bringing to birth the values of God's kingdom of justice and mercy.

And finally. The Beatitudes, traditionally set as the gospel reading for All Saints' Day: the Beatitudes give voice to our need of transformation. Far from being (as some bible commentaries would say) a more positive or improved version of the *Thou-shalt-nots* of the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes go much deeper: they challenge us to be part of the household of saints who seek to follow the Jesus who calls us, for instance, 'blessed', for instance, if we mourn. This is not just about mourning our loved ones departed, but mourning our sins and failings or lack of love. Calls us 'blessed' if we are meek and hunger for righteousness: we're called to be people who indeed try to see 'right' prevail. The Jesus who calls us 'blessed' if we are merciful, not always immediately reacting and 'giving as good as we get'. And we need plenty of people who are 'pure in heart' and 'peacemakers'. It is people like this who make up the household of the saints of God.

So I hope that the holy places of pilgrimage, whether Kevelaer, Santiago or Canterbury, may be a reminder of the call to us to remember that we are each on a journey on the pilgrimage through life.

And in this season of All Saints and All Souls:

As we journey on, may we be recognized, as from our first reading, as Children of God to those around us;

may we know for ourselves the transforming light and power and love of Christ;

may we be as *Consolatrix Afflictorum*, Consoler of the Afflicted – reaching out to others, bringing healing for hurts, and the light of Christ in a dark world.

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Philip Banks
30 October 2016