

## LEADING FROM THE FONT!

St. Michael's Cornhill

Sung Eucharist and Dedication of the Leaderboard

Easter IV

Sunday, April 26<sup>th</sup> 2015

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Some of you may have had the privilege to have been to a reception at 10, Downing Street. If you haven't you may well have seen television glimpses of the front staircase with its procession of Prime Ministers' portraits from the very first one, Sir Robert Walpole in 1721 (just after our church tower was finished!) right up until the present day with David Cameron. I can only imagine Gordon Brown's response when morning by morning he was greeted by Tony Blair's smiling face; and earlier PMs too might have had similar disaffected responses to their predecessors.

Now, following that, let me transport you some 1,200 miles to the south east, to the basilica of St. Paul-outside-the-Walls on the edge of ancient Rome. In this church, where it's believed St. Paul is buried, all along the great classical frieze are a series of images of all the Popes right the way from the death of St. Peter until Pope Francis I.

So, the exercise in which we are engaged today, with our new leaderboard is hardly unique. But why do we do this, why are we so keen on lists, on successions, on annals of our predecessors? There are perhaps two really important reasons why we do it. First of all, these annals provide a narrative, a treasury of stories that have made us who we are. So, first on our own list is the priest Alnothus. Almost certainly he is simply the first priest about whom we know. But, remembering that St. Michael's is built directly over the basilica of the former Roman forum, where Emperors would have been worshipped until the end of the fourth century, then almost certainly a Christian church would have been built over the basilica, or even more likely, the basilica itself was converted, like the great Aula Palatina at Trier in Germany.

So, there the story begins. Later on, Richard Atfelde would have seen terror and intrigue when in 1381 the leaders of the Peasants Revolt burst past the Tower of London, down Cornhill on their way from Mile End to Cheapside and Smithfield to assassinate those whom they saw as traitors. Then, in 1503 John Wardroper was presented to the living by Evesham Abbey, just before our beloved Drapers took over the patronage. The due reticence of the Drapers is clear from his remaining Rector for another 12 years. It was a very smooth transfer. The Commonwealth period saw some Puritan divines installed, rather to the distaste of our present Director of Music, and then John Meriton, Rector in 1666, the year of the great fire saw his church gutted.

So, we arrive at the Drapers' 650<sup>th</sup> year when Admiral the Lord Boyce presented a restless missionary from the north to the living. But I said, a moment ago, there were *two* reasons why we might be so keen on lists, successions and annals. That second reason is all about tradition. Now, tradition is not simply a mindless subservience to the past. Tradition is a living energy, for the Latin and Greek words behind the word – in theology and in Scripture mean handing on. *Handing on is dynamic* and so also implies development. But what exactly are we handing on? It's here that our three excellent readings come to our aid, indeed set out

the foundations. For today is often called *Shepherd Sunday*, remembering the Good Shepherd gospel we've just heard. What are shepherds, if not leaders?

That reading from the Acts of the Apostles, effectively sees Peter and the tiny embryonic Christian community challenged by the Jewish establishment: 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' Peter is equally forceful in his answer: 'By the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom *you* crucified and whom God raised from the tomb. So here is our *leader*, clearly identified – *Jesus the crucified one*.

Then, we heard from the Letter of John. In different terms, that letter confirms the same message: 'By this we know love, that *he laid down his life for us*; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren'. Our leader is indeed the crucified and risen one. We are expected to be ready too for such rough and tough justice.

Then, the climax comes in the gospel. Jesus says: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' Leadership, following Jesus Christ, is a servant leadership and for some, like Jesus, to the point of dying. In my last two years as Bishop of Wakefield, a number of our church schools became academies. Each time one did, I would go and bless and dedicate the newly refounded school. As I did so, I included one semi-sacramental act. I took with me a simple wooden shepherd's staff or crook which I gave to the head teacher. I encouraged the principal or head teacher to fix it close to the door of his or her study. Any leadership, if it is one of integrity will be costly, like Jesus, the good shepherd.

Here, then, is the *tradition* which we have received. Here is the pattern established in Jesus. Here is the leadership within which we are all endowed in baptism as we are drowned and raised in Christ. It's not leadership from the *front*, but leadership from the *font*. Now, there's one more irony about that word tradition. The Greek word *paradidomai* is also the word for Jesus' betrayal by Judas. Here Jesus is *handed over*. He allows himself to be done unto. This profound understanding of Jesus was captured perfectly by the poet Stevie Smith, when she first read Dr Rieu's translation of St. Mark's Gospel. She set out her response in her poem *The Airy Christ*.

Stevie led a troubled life – the excellent play about her is on at the moment at the Hampstead Theatre with Zoë Wanamaker playing the lead. Stevie's tortured outlook surfaces in this poem. She sees Christ as singing a song about life and death. The final stanzas run:

'Deaf men will pretend sometimes they hear the song, the words  
And make excuse to sin extremely; this will be absurd.

Heed it not. Whatever foolish men may do the song is cried  
For those who hear, and the sweet singer does not care that he was crucified

For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything  
Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.'

They are challenging words. The Drapers' Company in their generous gift have reminded us again of the challenge which we must ever put to the world in Christ. Amen

#### Readings

Acts. 4. 5-11.

I. John. 3. 16-end

John.10., 11-18.