

THE MYSTERY OF OUR RELIGION

Feast of St. Dunstan

St. Dunstan-in-the-West

Saturday, May 16th 2015

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Any of you who know Oxford well will know the extraordinary variety of distinguished buildings which make up the Bodleian Library. James Gibbs' circular Radcliffe Camera, the stunning mediaeval Divinity School quadrangle, and then the classical front of the Clarendon Building. In the past, it was only when you stand on the steps of the Clarendon Building and looked to the New Bodleian that there was just a little sense of disappointment. There, on the corner of Broad Street and Parks Road stood Giles Gilbert Scott's rather solemn ashlar edifice of the 1930s.

In essence, Scott's building was strong and noble, but it was also forbidding. Some ten years ago, as the university sought to organise the entire library more effectively, they decided to remodel Scott's New Bodleian. The Garfield Weston Foundation put in their highest gift yet to any institution, an unprecedented £25 million and the resultant Weston Library, as it is now known, is a triumph. Scott's building remains in shape and concept, but now it welcomes you in. So, the foundation, framework of shape of the building is the same, but it has been developed – even transformed. It is an interesting image for our faith.

Now, with that in mind, as you enter this transformed building, you're beckoned to a stunning exhibition, *Marks of Genius*. As I looked round at the manuscripts I sought in vain a document relating to your patron. It's called popularly, St. Dunstan's *Classbook* and its original provenance was the great Benedictine abbey at Glastonbury. Glastonbury was a foundation which Dunstan remarkably refounded, along with Westminster, Bath, Malmesbury and two more abbeys relating back to the late and great King Alfred, in the Somerset levels.

Dunstan was a remarkable, intelligent and holy man. Indeed, he is one of the few people of that period whom even the most *malicious gossips* – then and later – found it impossible to malign. Refounding abbeys, reforming the monastic life and doing so within the scholarly context that had been established by Alfred and his court, was but part of the amazing contribution that Dunstan gave. He too took the Christian foundations and transformed them. If that is so, then, what might this say to us as we celebrate again his name day? In the light of that question what do our readings suggest?

The brief extract from Exodus offers a reflection on the scholarly and artistic inheritance of Dunstan – ability, intelligence, craftsmanship and design. Matthew’s gospel passage takes us into the little apocalypse with Jesus challenging his hearers to a proper readiness; it has all the atmosphere of Advent. But perhaps most interesting to us today is that piece from the first letter to Timothy. After a rather wearisome and tedious account of how everyone under the sun ought to behave, there is injected rather surprisingly something utterly different. Let me remind you:

‘Great indeed, is the mystery of our religion.’

‘He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.’

Almost certainly it is either a minimal version of an early creed, or a snippet from something larger. It doesn’t mention Christ, but surely it is about the impact of Jesus – and well appropriate for this Ascensiontide season remembering that it ends:

‘taken up in glory.’

But an interesting point too is the introduction:

‘Great indeed is the *mystery of our religion*.’

Here mystery appears to be referring to the essential kernel of our faith.

Now, one of the greatest scholars of the twentieth century liturgical movement was the German Benedictine, Odo Casel. He was clear that at the heart of the liturgy was the re-presentation of the mystery of our faith. That mystery - not dissimilar to that brief creed from I Timothy - is the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Mass, the re-presentation of that mystery empowers individuals and the entire Eucharistic community to manifest the qualities inspired in Jesus. So it is both radically traditional and radically transforming and new. Back to the building with which I began, Back to the figure of Dunstan.

Here is the model seen classically and inspiringly in your patron. Here is a pattern which we lose now at our peril. There’s much talk in the Church of England at present about renewal, growth and change. There’s much reference to better management, value for money, better PR even. None of this in itself need cause demur. But none of it is anything at all if it is not rooted in the mystery of our faith. That is why proper, well founded, residential training, an enriching of our library and academic resources, and a real and continuing commitment to the parish system – which Dunstan to some degree rooted for us in England – all of these remain essential.

Every generation sees its time as critical. The question how can the Church survive is traceable in different ways even to the time of the Fathers. If we rehearse, celebrate and *live the mystery of our faith*, then we can afford to be adventurous in how we communicate it too. That was Dunstan’s gift, and what the contents of his *Classbook* implied. Jesus Christ is *believed on in the world, taken up in glory*. That is what we are called to live and celebrate today. Amen.

Readings

Exodus. 31. 1-5

I. Tim. 3. 14-16.

Matthew. 24. 42-46.