

Sermon preached by the Ven David Lowman
Patronal Festival of Saint Edmund
St Edmundsbury Cathedral 18.11.2018

‘Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.’ Jesus’ harsh words in Matthew – not to mention some tough comments about the in-laws.

There are times when you wonder why and how the Christian faith really caught on. It was founded by a former carpenter who was an itinerant preacher and healer, never comfortable with the religious elite and who came to a horrible end on a cross. Then to make matters worse his friends claimed that he had risen from the dead and had been seen by many of them. Was he a King, a magician, a fraud or possibly, just possibly the Son of God?

Read the Acts of the Apostles and we can see the incredible effect Jesus had on people – thousands converted – lives changed with characters like Peter and Paul- impetuous and dangerous proclaiming Good News. Within 20 years of his death we read of the story of Jesus being taught openly by Paul in Rome – the centre of the world, the heart of the cult of the Emperor / God. Christians suffered and died. Nero burned them as candles for his festivities but the faith did not die out or collapse. More came to believe and it spread East into Turkey and on to India, South to Egypt and Ethiopia, West to Spain and North to the heathen lands of the British Isles.

We can forget what it was like to be living in times of persecution and mockery. Or perhaps not when we hear of blasphemy trials in Pakistan or bombs in Coptic churches in Cairo or just apathy in much of our own land.

When I was Archdeacon of Chelmsford I had the remarkable St Peter’s Chapel at Bradwell in my area. It was founded in 654 by St Cedd who came down by boat from Lindisfarne, Holy Island and built monasteries at Bradwell and Tilbury. As well as having many other claims to fame, Essex has holy places and was a centre of missionary zeal.

A little later King Edmund died for his faith – struck by arrows and eventually beheaded somewhere near here. No doubt the perpetrators of the deed hoped that he would be just another forgotten religious figure. Indeed if he had kept his mouth shut he might well not have died. So why did he do it? Well I will tell you. He believed in the light of God, he saw the glory, he took up the cross and followed Jesus. Then a thin stream of pilgrims came to visit this place, then more and more until one of the largest churches in England and indeed the world was constructed here. They came in their thousands to somewhere that was special and to venerate someone who had taken the cross and followed his Lord.

There is a wonderful hymn with an equally wonderful tune which I find makes me tingle whenever I hear it. ‘In our day of thanksgiving one psalm let us offer

For the saints who before us have found their reward’

It continues: ‘These stones that have echoed their praises are holy

And dear is the ground where their feet have once trod.

Yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims

And still they were seeking the city of God.'

Even the destruction of the great monastery at the Reformation could not stop the great movement of faith. There was change, theological and social, much of it for good and valid reasons but still the story of faith was told and retold. Now it is our turn to stand on holy ground. What can it mean?

Last week we were all moved by the centenary remembrance of the First World War. The poet Wilfred Owen is better known now than in his own day. One of his short and powerful poems is titled 'At a calvary near the Ancre'. Where was God in that awful mess? Owen saw a wayside Calvary, damaged like everything else. The leg was missing. Here was the suffering God. Nothing easy, nothing pious. Just pain and dirt and filth and a living presence. The poem ends:

'But they who love the greater love lay down their life, they do not hate'

There is an abiding story in my life about a lady called Gladys. I organised a visit to the Holy Land. This elderly lady wanted to go. I suggested kindly that she was on the old side at 92. She replied that before she sees the New Jerusalem she would like to see the Old Jerusalem. You are on Gladys! We crawled into the tomb at the Holy Sepulchre. Ostensibly I was there as her priest, holy and all of that and also the person looking after her. I was not really sure about the tomb. Then she knelt down by the stone slab and prayed. I watched her and discovered something real about the Resurrection.

'Sing praise then for all who here sought and here found him

Whose journey is ended, whose perils are past'

They believed in the Light; and its glory is round them,

Where the clouds of earth's sorrows are lifted at last.

The glory of the Lord was there that day . May we be witnesses to the truth of God with us in all that we do.

St Edmund pray for us.