

Second Sunday of the Year 2022

Isaiah 62.1-5, 1 Corinthians 12.4-11, John 2.1-12

His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” A word from our gospel reading, John chapter 2.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

It has become a standing joke of my curacy that whenever someone asks me what exactly the curate’s job involves, Fr Peter and I respond, in unison, “Doing what the vicar says.” So when he told me to look up “the Walsingham poem” during our trip to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham on Tuesday, I did.

It turns out that the Walsingham poem, attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh, which begins

As you came from the holy land
of Walsinghame
Met you not with my true love
By the way as you came?

... is not so much about Walsingham itself as it is about sex and romantic misadventure, though it does have a strong Marian flavour.

“Such a one did I meet, good sir,
Such an angelic face,
Who like a queen, like a nymph, did appear
By her gait, by her grace.”

One’s taste might, of course, run to the more allegorical love-poem
that we heard just now
in Isaiah:

³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

...

you shall be called My Delight is in Her,
and your land Married;

for the Lord delights in you,

...

and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.

However, it is good to have found a poem that references
Walsingham, not least so it can be memorised for chanting out loud
on the bus journey the next time we all go on a parish pilgrimage.

Obedience is certainly a virtue when it comes to seeking out poetry, and might even be a gift of the holy spirit if it yields the good fruit of new learning. We heard St Paul describing various gifts in his first letter to the Corinthians - speaking in and interpreting tongues, healing, faith itself. If curacies had existed then, he would surely have included in his list of virtues “doing what the vicar says”, not least because thereby one might learn something about what it means to be catholic.

Being at Mary Mags is good instruction for what it means to be a catholic Anglican. And we who would call ourselves catholics should remember that this is not about our habits, or our liturgy, or the amount of incense we use, although those are sometimes helpful shorthands. Being catholic is more about obedience: obedience to God and to the bishop; regular prayer; a belief in hierarchy and command within the Church. At their centre, being catholic, and being obedient, mean looking upwards, and not making everything about one's own self.

The moment when you walk into the chapel and see Our Lady in splendour at Walsingham is a wonderful one, but Walsingham is a place that focuses obediently upwards in more senses than the visual. It is a place that looks upwards spiritually, soaked in the prayers of generations of Anglo-Catholics who have found their pilgrim home there, travelling from great distances to ask Our Blessed Lady for her intercession. And it has stronger ties with this particular parish than

probably anywhere else in the Anglican communion, with two vicars closely associated with its refounding and revival from the 1920s onwards.

Someone was kind enough to say recently, and we hope it might be true, that Mary Mags, too, is a place that “thrums with prayer”.

And so we circle round again to obedience: not just in looking upward, but in prayer. Just as Jesus left a legacy of people instructed in his teachings and his sacraments, taught to baptise and to celebrate the Eucharist, he also left us with instructions for how to pray: in Matthew and Luke, he gives us the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer is not just about wanting to talk to God, though of course there is nothing wrong with that. The Lord’s Prayer, which follows Jesus’ example and obeys his command, reminds us of the very heart of our relationship with God: dependence, trust, and adoration. That is why we pray it at the emotional high point, and still point, of the mass, before receiving communion.

It is a strange moment: we pray in a very private way before receiving the sacrament, but also together, in one unified voice, and out loud. There is a deep sense of both privacy and community.

Privacy in public worship is another distinctive part of being an Anglo-Catholic. No one in particular is audible when we say the

Lord's Prayer together, just as when we say psalms together, or the creed: the focus is not on each other, but on God.

When we pray together out loud, we are supported by those around us in a very immediate way. When we say the creed, we may not believe every word, every time; because the tide of faith rolls in and out quite naturally, and it would be strange if we were able to maintain rock-solid certainty throughout our lives. But what we can depend on is that the person next to us is supporting us, and we them, by saying the words together.

After all, it is the rare Christian who can exist in a vacuum. Even St Simeon the Stylite, the fifth-century Syrian ascetic who lived for 37 years atop a small platform on a pillar, had something of a community: pilgrims who sought him out for counsel despite his best efforts to retreat into obscurity in order to practice his elaborate devotions. It is worth noting, of course, that St Simeon *did* live originally in a monastery as a teenager, where his devotions were considered so extreme that they were deemed unseemly and extravagant, and he was ejected by his brethren from the community. Choosing to live for a while on a rocky outcrop, he was eventually driven from there to the famous pillar because he was trying to get away from the pilgrims who had invaded the area to seek his counsel and his prayers. So even with St Simeon, part of being a Christian was about the virtue of perseverance. And this applies to us, whether it is in maintaining and nurturing the community that we have, or in maintaining good habits of prayer.

Persevere we must, because we are imperfect, and our churches are imperfect -- Walsingham is imperfect, and Mags is imperfect -- but the one thing we can always do is keep praying together.

Our Mother is right, as usual: "Do whatever he tells you," she says. The gospel account of the miracle at the wedding at Cana is a sign of Christ's power and authority. It is evidence that obedience to this man who is God is absolutely essential. Our Lady says "Do whatever he tells you" before anyone sees the miracle; but after that, the miracle is evidence enough that he should be obeyed.

So let us take the Lord's Prayer as our guide, and pray in obedience, perseverance, and mutual support: accepting God's will in the world; asking for our needs to be met; remembering to forgive each other; seeking his protection and mercy; and beginning and ending all our prayers with an acknowledgement of his splendour and his might.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.

Amen.