

SERMON – CHRIST THE KING, EDMUND KING & MARTRY
– 20 November 2022



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

One of the benefits of being ill is that I can lie on the sofa and watch youtube videos on my new ipad. Lots of trains, various bits of music, some wonderful old comedies, and some programmes to stretch the old brain cell. A 2014 series on the BBC about Gothic architecture presented by Janina Ramirez included the Wilton Dyptych, so I'll tell you about that today.

It is a small, portable altarpiece now in the National Gallery in London, one of a handful of English panel paintings to have survived from the Middle Ages. It was made for Richard II, King of England from 1377 to 1399, in the last five years of his life. This is the outside of it, as you can see it has been well-used, so probably this was the King's personal altar piece, he may well have knelt before it regularly in his prayers. The arms on the left combine Edward the Confessor's shield with Richard's emblems, England and France, and the white hart his personal symbol. It had been used by his mother, but it may also be a pun on his name (*Richart* in French). Imagine him picking up his altar, and opening it up.



On the right we have the Virgin and child, and eleven angels – some sources say Richard was 11 when he came to the throne.



Can you see that each angel is wearing the symbol of the white hart too – the symbol, the lineage of this earthly King is recognised by heaven itself.



The King is kneeling – again, his white hart symbol at his throat and on his cloak. He is pictured as a young man, as he was when he was crowned, even though, by the time this Dyptych was painted, he was much older. So there was a reminder in this that Christ had been with him all through his reign. Draw a line between the eyes of Richard and the eyes of Christ, they are looking straight at each other. The King may be on his knees, but he looks into the eyes of his Lord. The Christ child has his hand raised in blessing, a very personal blessing.

Standing behind Richard is John the Baptist. He is the forerunner of Christ, he's holding the Lamb of God. In the middle is Edward the Confessor, one of the last Anglo-Saxon Kings, ruling from 1042-1066. Richard is tracing his lineage back, before the Norman Conquest. Sometimes described as unworldly and pious, he was the founder of Westminster Abbey, where young Richard had been crowned – and if you want a king at your back as you kneel before Christ, an unworldly, pious King is probably a good choice.

Next to him is Edmund, King and Martyr. A ninth century East Anglian King, crowned on Christmas Day 856, a young man, but a young man who was a good king – he ruled justly, wisely, the Chroniclers have lots of positive things to say about him. He led his people when they were threatened by a host of Vikings attacking across the North Sea. He was a Christian king fighting the heathen. Even in defeat at the battle of Thetford, he was brave, withdrawing down the Roman Road, to regather his troops and no doubt fight on.



Wall painting in the church of St Peter and St Paul, Pickering, N Yorkshire

When the Vikings caught up with him, somewhere in Hagelisdun Wood, when they told him to renounce his Christian faith, he refused. He stood up for what he believed and, like his King, King Jesus, he faced his death bravely. Tied to a tree, “shot full of arrows until he looked like a hedgehog” (to quote a Chronicler writing a few centuries later). Then his head chopped off, thrown into the bushes. A day or two later, when his followers could come to find his body, they found a wolf, guarding the head of their King – “hic, hic” barked the wolf – in East Anglia we have wolves who can speak Latin – and when they put the head and body together, they were miraculously fused.



His body was taken to Beodrichsworth, in time an abbey was built over the site, and the town became known as Bury St Edmunds. A place of pilgrimage, a place of miracles, a place where Royalty came to say their prayers, to make offerings. Richard II and his Queen visited in 1383, spending ten days in Bury while making a pilgrimage through to Walsingham. Apparently it was a very lavish, very expensive, visit, and I suspect the Abbey were quite glad when they all rode on to Walsingham. You can imagine the King spending time on his knees before the shrine of St Edmund, and being immersed in the story, the cult, of Edmund.



Just another couple of lovely things to point out. The standard, the flag of St George, the symbol of England, being held by an angel on the right. Is she giving it to Richard, or has he presented the standard to her?



You see that little orb at the top of the flag pole. Go onto the National Gallery website and zoom in, and you'll see it is a tiny orb showing an island with green trees and a white tower, set in a sea of silver leaf that is now flaked and tarnished. Together they represent England, which was thought to be under the special protection of the Virgin and was commonly referred to as her dowry. Is that where Shakespeare got his idea of a "precious stone set in a silver sea?"



Today is the Feast of Christ the King – and our King is a King who has suffered. In his halo you can see the outline of the crown of thorns. Mary raises his foot, a foot that will be nailed to the cross. In 1399 Richard was captured by the troops of his cousin, the future Henry IV, in 1399. He was forced to abdicate and then imprisoned by the new king, and later starved to death at Pontefract Castle, in West Yorkshire. I suspect he was stripped of everything of value before they threw him into a cell, but I hope that this image of his loving God, his Christ, was imprinted in his mind, and he found some consolation and strength in his faith.



On a final, happier note, look at the carpet of flowers Mary and the angels are standing on, and there – over at the right – can you see the mushrooms. Apparently mushrooms are a symbol of the resurrection. So on that note, here is my wife and a very large mushroom which appeared in our lawn last week.



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14 November 2022