

St Edmund and Christ the King, 21st November 2021 St. Edmunds.

Revelation 1:4b-8, John 18: 33-37

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

Happy Patronal Festival! Once more I am preaching on St. Edmund's Day - no, I'm not sure how that works out, but here I go again. I have talked in the past about St Edmund, and few of you, if any, will be surprised that there have been no big breakthroughs in the story since I last told you about his death. There are always rumours, including that his remains are under the tennis courts, but it has not been a time of archaeological revelations, at least not in Bury St Edmunds. I have also spoken about saints generally, about the special people that have left their stories of faith and courage through the centuries, and we may have cause to think about some of those women and men later.

Today I want to think about where we are sitting - a special place. Now I know that there are some present who could give me chapter and verse on the history of this building, its setting in the churchyard, the yew tree that gives the little place its name. It has certainly been a place of faith for many centuries, even possibly a thousand years, even though what we see in the interior may be far more recent. The tower, I'm told, is the oldest part, and the yew outside is probably the oldest tree for some distance around, shown on the St Edmund's Allestree logo. If this was an interactive talk - I checked, it's not - I would ask you to close your eyes and just listen, think about this place. All that time, all those people who have sat here listening, thinking, praying.

Last week Peter spoke about some gravestones in the churchyard outside which mark some burials of those who died as a result of War. They, the memorial cross which was surrounded by wreaths and other physical reminders last week, and other markers of the last century of conflicts which have affected the people in this place, show how things have changed, and have not always been easy for those who have worshipped here. Because even special places change, are marked by events, even adapt to new uses, new demands. Whether it's the

repainting of the ceiling last year, the beautiful flower arrangements, or perhaps improving the accessibility in the future, even a special place like this changes. Happily the Yew tree seems to continue to flourish - so I'm not going near it...

We each have places that are special to us. Sometimes we can visit, like a churchyard just outside Newcastle which is special to us, but last year we couldn't return there for many months. We may have special places that bring back happy memories, of holidays, special occasions or where we have just spent good times. It's at this point I was going to list my favourite bookshops and libraries, but that was vetoed by the Vicar. I asked about his list of favourite tea shops... We have places that are important to us, for very good reasons, and I think we should celebrate them.

Special places in the Christian sense are often pilgrimage sites, and for centuries they have been at the heart of the Christian faith. It is possible that it is because of a pilgrimage undertaken by someone in history that this church is called St. Edmund. It is possible that someone had been on a pilgrimage to Suffolk, to the shrine of the martyred saint, and decided to establish a church here in his name. Because pilgrimage, going to a special place often because it has a religious significance, was a very popular activity for centuries. It was probably a lifetime adventure for many, while for others it was part of the job. In Britain, after St Edmund was fashionable, the place to go was Canterbury, to the place where Thomas Becket was murdered by four knights. You may have read some of the Canterbury Tales by Chaucer, you may have seen performances of plays or television based on them. Obviously they should be treated with caution as they can be a bit bawdy, but they do make the point that all sorts of people were willing to travel at great inconvenience and cost to visit certain places to pray, to seek a miracle cure, or possibly just to have an adventure. Those who have had the money, time and energy have travelled to what was called the Holy Land, to walk in the footsteps of the earthly Jesus, to visit the sites where it is believed that he was born, was tried, forced to walk to his crucifixion, and the tomb where he was buried and was resurrected. Obviously that was a difficult and dangerous thing to undertake, and

even now it means entering parts of the world where the control of places is contested. It used to be said that if you made enough pilgrimages to British holy places it would be the equivalent of going to Jerusalem, so there is hope for those of us without a current passport.

On our televisions you may have seen Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visiting the site of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. A future king visiting the place where Christ the King made a commitment to his role as the Son of God. Many of the Christian sites that we can think of in Britain are associated with saints, with special people, like many of the Cathedrals. St Hugh is associated with Lincoln Cathedral, St Cuthbert with Durham, and St Etheldreda at Ely. They were often leaders, people who tried to live as an example to others.

In some ways Jesus is the ultimate leader, the King who faced trials with courage, whose words give hope to all those who will listen. That was confusing to those who opposed him, who tried to understand his mission, his purpose on earth. Pilate, the Roman governor who was given the job of condemning Jesus, asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus replied, as we heard in the gospel reading today, in terms of a question. "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate is confused. He is not a Jew, and this man is condemned by the Jews. But how can this man be a king, in a small corner of an empire that stretched throughout the known world. Jesus points out that "You", Pilate, says he is a king, a leader, a claimant to power. It is much more straightforward than that. Jesus says that the whole presence, his birth, is to testify to the truth. The truth of his being the Son of God, offering new life to those who follow him, who place their faith in God. Being Christ the King is different from how we understand being a ruler in an earthly way, being a leader.

So today we think about a special place, this church, this place made special by decades and centuries of prayer, of thought, as a sanctuary for those who seek something different from their daily lives, but at the centre of a community. We think about places that are special to us for all sorts of reasons, for joy, sadness, for peace. We have thought about leaders, special people who have met trials with courage

and wisdom. That culminates in Jesus, king eternal and yet also a vulnerable baby as we remember in the coming weeks. And we think of ourselves as special, even if we are not leaders, but because we can all do something, be there for others, contribute to the happiness of others, perhaps lighten their load. We are special people in a special place today, and we can recognise the uniqueness of Jesus as Saviour king, today and forever. Amen.

Julie Barham
19 November 2021