



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - July 2010

Looking at ruins ...

AT THIS time of year monastic ruins are often in my mind. There is the Walsingham Pilgrimage in the Abbey Ruins, the site of Walsingham Priory. Then there is the Glastonbury Pilgrimage, celebrated amidst the ruins of another famous Abbey. On holiday this year I visited Castle Acre Priory in Norfolk. Catching up at last with Hilary Mantel's brilliant novel, *Wolf Hall*, my holiday reading, I was more than aware of the suppression of 800 monasteries by Thomas Cromwell, in the late 1530s. What Cromwell encouraged Henry VIII to believe was that what belonged to the Church really belonged to the State. He was to be Head of the Church, and the Crown the rightful owner of the Church's lands, properties, and treasures. I can't help reflecting that, nearly 500 years later, national support for the Church is in the hands of the Church Commissioners for England. That fund is no longer large enough to provide stipends and pensions for the clergy. Not only that, but parishioners are asked as well to support the fabric of parish churches up and down the land. There are handsome grants, to be sure, but individual worshippers are often asked for fund-raising help with the bell-tower, the lighting, the organ, the roof, or the steeple. Other countries have other stories: here the State maintains church buildings, there funds are raised by a church tax. Sometimes the problems are not financial at all. Parts of Scandinavia have well-maintained churches, well-paid clergy and church officials – salaried organists and youth leaders in quite small places – but almost no interest is shown by the general public in church-going. You value what you pay for.

It seems to me that we badly need a 'new deal' in this country. We need to look again at what Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell did to the Church. If the buildings truly belong to the State, then let the State look after them. Nowadays, it probably means that they should be shared by the Christians whose inheritance they are and used and managed ecumenically, freeing up quite a number of mostly indifferent buildings to be sold on or developed. Meanwhile, let the Church concentrate on paying for what it alone can do: the formation and deployment of ministers, the pastoral care of God's people, the worship of the Church, its liturgy and evangelistic outreach. Let everyone who shares in, and benefits from, this work consider once more the invitation to half-tithe net income. That invitation, originally from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, recognises the need for us to be generous in other directions too. It recognises the help that Gift Aid brings in repaid tax. It leaves us with a well-supported clergy, a well-supported mission, and 95% of our take-home pay intact for personal and family use. A half-tithe, 5% of 'take-home', is impossible for some, but a drop in the ocean for others. And, whatever the future holds, the continuing life and work of the Church remains compelling, urgent, and - because it gives glory to God – beautiful too. The beauty of holiness.

May God bless you as you seek to discern and obey his will.

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