

Sermon Easter IV 2006 The practice of the presence of God...

We've just got back from our holiday in Malta – tremendously impressed. It's like England used to be in the 1950s but with all day sunshine. The first things you notice – can't miss 'em – are the churches; even the little villages have what look like huge basilicas with twin towers and a dome you can see from miles away. The yellow *Leyland* buses are like something from the 1950s as well, and when you get on one you are immediately aware of the Christian religion.

The first bus I caught to go out to the silent city of Mdina had a motto written large over the driver's window: *Verbum Dei Caro Factus Est. The Word of God is made flesh.* Well it sure beats *Please give up this seat to a differently-abled person* or *Do Not Spit.* And next to the gospel text a picture of the Virgin and Child. When the buses are about to start off, most of the Maltese passengers make the Sign of the Cross. Now the way they drive on Malta, I'm only surprised they don't hold a full Votive Mass – or a Requiem.

I was looking forward to seeing the city of Mdina and St Paul's cathedral there. In a couple of weeks when the Master Mariners come again with the Princess Royal for their annual service, we shall hear that exciting lesson from *The Acts of the Apostles* about how St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta – Melita, as it was called in those days. And we shall sing the hymn called *Melita*, the sailors' hymn, *Eternal Father Strong to Save.* St Paul was rescued by the kindly Maltese and he converted the Roman Governor Publius who became a bishop and a saint.

The city of Mdina, high on a hill overlooking the whole island, is a magnificent sight as the bus winds up from Valetta and you sit praying and crossing yourself at every wild bend. As I said, Mdina the silent city. Who are they kidding? They'd forgotten the gangs of blundering tourists, the cultural anthropologists with their digital cameras and mobile phones. We walked into St Paul's Square. But even before we entered the square itself we were assaulted by a voice like Hitler's warmer-up at a Nuremburg Rally. This, lady...this German tour guide was bellowing her information all about the silent city.

We escaped inside the cathedral. Here ruining the beautiful Baroque it was the turn of the English tour guide and her gang of gawpers in their hideous clothes covered in advertising slogans, their faces raised to the ceiling, their jaws dropped. This English lady was, as you would expect, not at all like Dr Goebbels at the Nazi rally. She spoke in the superior intonation of the Hertfordshire Historical Society and in that exquisitely detached way which explains all about what Christians used to do in the days when the faith counted for something in Europe. And the voyeuristic hordes lumber about like a plague of zombies or very senior members of the Prayer Book Society. There were notices politely requesting no flash photography. Some hopes! I felt sorry for the Verger plaintively calling out *No photographs, please!*

Of course the cultural barbarians ignored him and continued their rapid firing at God with their confounded gadgets. But I wanted to ask why. Why do they take dozens of pictures of a place they don't understand and certainly don't respect? Is it so that, in the long winter evenings, they can show them to their similarly appalling dinner guests and say, *Look at this one – this is another place where me and the wife went*

and behaved like vandals! But what would St Paul have said? We know what the Lord Jesus said when his disciples asked when the end of the world would come. He said, *When you see the Abomination of Desolation standing in the Holy Place.* Judging from the behaviour in the silent city, I don't think the end will be very long delayed

Of course, this religious tourism, really voyeurism, isn't confined to shrines on Malta. We get it all the time in London. No sooner do we sit down to our tea at St Sepulchre's and a crowd lumbers up under the window and the guide begins to bellow about body-snatchers and ghosts and the Execution Bell. And the gang of giggling voyeurs pretend to be frightened and all go *Ooh!*

But it's worse than you think. The lumbering voyeurs are not ashamed of themselves. They actually give themselves spiritual brownie points for going in churches at all: these ones who come in rustling their carrier bags – the same ones they use during the Schubert *pianissimo* movement – and watch from the back of church while we're saying our prayers. For the desertion of Christianity in Europe has turned us into a museum culture. Many imagine that there's something spiritually praiseworthy about shuffling round a National Trust property or watching *The Last Night of the Proms*. It's a kind of consumerism of the soul, something vague and useless called *spirituality* in the *Body Mind and Spirit* section of the chain bookshop.

Aesthetic refinement is no substitute for the Christian faith. And it will not save us in the hour of need. Clicking your digital camera in church is no substitute for going to Mass. And learning *about* God is not to be compared with knowing God and loving him. There was a notable example of religion in Malta in 1565. The Turks were besieging the island and they captured and killed many of the Christian Knights of St John. They beheaded them and floated them across the harbour on crosses. The Grand Master of the Knights of St John cut off the heads of many Turkish prisoners and fired them back at the enemy like cannon balls.

Gosh – whatever would the General Synod say! I'm not recommending that we massacre the Turks today. In fact on Good Friday the Parish Clerk prayed for their conversion, using the Collect in the Prayer Book. For the health of our own souls and for the survival of the nation we need to find again our Christian faith – not as some aspect of how we used to live in the good old days. But we need to hold to it, believe it and practise it.

I'll give you an example. The other Sunday evening in Malta on Old Bakery Street, the local church was celebrating its Patronal Festival of St Augustine. We were caught up in this as we went out for dinner. Crowds and singing and cheering. A gigantic statue of St Augustine brought out of the church and paraded in the street. Firecrackers and a band as good as the Royal Marines. When we came back from dinner at ten o'clock bedtime it was still going on. Only now it had moved inside the church and a fine student orchestra were playing Haydn. There was Benediction in Latin and the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

As Coleridge said, you could *feel* the truth of this religion. Working men kneeling for a long time on the stone floor – their eyes fixed on the Sacrament. And I'm not just talking about peasants and the labouring classes: there were very obviously successful

business men as well. Children. Mothers. Teenagers. Babes in arms. They were not tourists or voyeurs or aesthetes. They believed their faith and they were living it as Our Lord commanded: *Do this in remembrance of me.*

This is what we need as individuals and as a people. We – you and I and all England - will not be saved by polite observances. We shall not be saved by municipal Protestantism which despises the adoration of the Sacrament and prefers the solemn elevation of the collecting plate instead. God invites us into love. God loves you passionately. And he wants you to love him with the same intensity. He asks us to draw near to him, to desire him, to want him above all else. There is nowhere else for us to go. For in him alone is life and his life is the light of men.