

A serious word of warning: if you pick up Roderick Braithwaite's magnificent history, *The Fueller's Tale* make sure it's not late in the evening or you'll never get to sleep. The book out in time for this auspicious Anniversary is not only beautifully produced and lavishly illustrated; it is terrifically exciting. How about this:

*Sir Edmund Godfrey, a wealthy London merchant selling coal and timber and a Justice of the Peace heard the case of Titus Oates and the catholic plot to kill the King. On the morning of Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October 1678, Godfrey left his house in Hartshorn lane by the Thames. He was seen walking in the fields to the north of Oxford Street and then failed to turn up for a lunch appointment. At two o'clock on the following Thursday afternoon, two men walking along the edge of a field on Primrose Hill noticed, gloves, a belt and a cane on the ground...Nearby, lying face down in a ditch, was Godfrey's body. His own sword had been driven right through him and the tip was sticking out of his back. Godfrey's murder was instantly sensational and chilling. His name was on everyone's lips in a spreading wave of apprehension that this was the first of the onslaught of Catholic terrorist murders...*

This history goes back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and it tells the elegant and elevating tale of the Fuellers from the days when they were Woodmongers. Elegant and elevating it surely is, but it is also picaresque and risqué in parts with accounts of racketeering, street fights and turf wars with the Carmen and Wharfingers. In one place Company members are described as *plying their unmissably dirty, noisy and fractious trade*. Here is Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *...dark was the night as pitch or as the coal*. Here are Pepys and Defoe, the Great Plague and the Great Fire. Here are medieval concerns about health and safety and *poisonous sea coal*. Logs for heating, turf for cooking and faggots for brewing. My copy of *The Fueller's Tale* arrived on Monday morning – and I've hardly slept since.

What comes across most vividly is the influence of our Company at the heart of commercial and political affairs for the best part of a millennium. So perhaps this 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is the moment to reflect for a few minutes on the significance of the Livery Company.

I should like to congratulate the court and officers – but really all of you – for you all contribute to the homely and cheerful ethos of the Fuellers' Company. In this service we give thanks for past blessings and we ask God's help for all that lies ahead.

Let us stand back then and look at the things which are basic and right at the centre of all we are trying to do. Consider the words *livery* and *company*. I know what livery is – because I wear it. Yards and yards of it in all colours to suit the various seasons of the church's year. And you get mixed comments. Some people love the church's livery, the vestments, the colours, lights, smells and bells. You even get those who are obsessed with these outward signs, connoisseurs of the exotic who creep from the church to church looking for ever more extravagant demonstrations of piety. And, let it be said, I have met a few clergy – not in these parts, I hasten to add – who drool over the catalogues of church suppliers as over some sort of ecclesiastical pornography.

Then there are those who hate every form of outward show. These people are addicted to another sort of religion – the religion of the rule-book. These are the sort who will enter your church unannounced and carefully scrutinise the priest for any gesture or sign, any inflexion or genuflection that might be forbidden by the *Thirty-nine Articles*.

Which reminds me of a nice story about Winston Churchill when he was being shown by Archbishop William Temple round Lambeth Palace. Temple said, *And we have forty bedrooms, Prime Minister*.

To which Churchill replied, *Typical of the Church of England: forty bedrooms and only thirty-nine articles!*

So are you Catholic or Puritan, ultramontane or modest. Cavalier or Roundhead? I know that the same comments made to priests are also made to liverymen. Some love the ceremonial – the badges, gongs and medals, the processions and the rites and ceremonies surrounding the Lord Mayor. I know also as a City Rector and as one privileged to have been Chaplain to the Lord Mayor, that those of us who go in for ceremonial receive as many sneers as cheers. There are people who say that we just like dressing up. So what's the point of it all?

Ceremony and ritual is not just some outward sign, something tacked on as an optional extra to the doctrine of the church or the constitution of the livery company. Ceremonial and vestments actually partake of the spiritual reality which they represent. We are human beings of flesh and blood; and words – good and great as they can be – are not enough. Let me put it this way: there's more to loving your wife than merely *telling* her. If Puritans and Bible Protestants were really thoroughgoing in what they believe, when they went into a restaurant they wouldn't eat anything but content themselves with learning the menu off by heart.

So our livery, our vestments, are indeed outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces. And our clothes, gestures and actions are part of that grace. The same goes for those other great virtues of church and livery – I mean etiquette and courtesy. Manners are not just in the head: they are how we behave. They are not just words, but deeds accomplished by men and women who are bodies, parts and passions. Church ritual is just good manners towards God.

The second word we can dwell on for a minute is *company*. It means togetherness. It means a shared solidarity and a common purpose. For there are things which can be achieved only when people lay aside personal interests and desires for some common good. What is the common good of our Company then? And of our church too? It is of course charity – and if there were time *charity* is another and much misunderstood word that could do with a bit of examination.

For there are those of a certain political persuasion and dogma who say that charity should be abolished and everything that's good should accrue to people by right. This is to treat human beings as if we were machines. Whereas the soul of humanity is to respond, to be generous, to be warm-hearted, to give not just of one's substance but of one's being. To give not just of our salaries but of ourselves.

And the meaning and purpose of livery and company is to express joy, rejoicing, thanksgiving, gratitude. The livery movement and the church are meant to be celebrations of the life we share which God has given us. We're not here for long. This life we have is a miracle, a mystery and a gift. Just think of it – the fact that we're here, that there is not *nothing* but *something*. And *there is no life not lived in community and no community not lived in praise of God*. There is such a thing as a Holy Cheeredupness for God's sake. As the Psalmist says, *This is the day which the Lord hath made: we will rejoice and be glad in it....*