

Sermon, Epiphany I 2004...

There is a certain personality known, I believe, in the trade as an anorak. Train-spotters, for example. And, while attending organ recitals might be a fairly innocent eccentricity, there are those devotees of that instrument about whom my friend the former Master of the Music at York Minster, Dr Francis Jackson says, “You can give them Bach or Buxtehude, but all they want to bang on about is ‘steam power’.” – as if the Renucci were the 8.53 from King’s Cross. Lest you should accuse me of throwing the largest stones from the most fragile glass house, let me say that there are clergymen who have a similarly stultified attitude to their religion.

There is for instance the theological training college – or perhaps I should say ‘camp’ – in Oxford: St Stephen’s House; also known as *Staggers* – and in a minute you will see why. At St Stephen’s – if the author A.N. Wilson is to be believed – and I see no reason why not since he was once a student there and I know him personally to be a man of integrity – if Andrew Wilson is to be believed, the male ordinands there – in the unreconstructed days when there were *only* male ordinands – used to delight in dressing up and calling one another by girls’ names. *Gloria*, I think, was a name especially coveted. And of course they were big in what might be described as ecclesiastical tat: where the lewd Selby coal-miner or the Sheffield steel labourer might drool over pictures of ample ladies on page three of his tabloid newspaper, the febrile young gentlemen at St Stephen’s would regularly work themselves into a frenzy over the *Mowbrays* catalogue featuring pictures of albs, frilly cottas, chasubles, girdles and the like.

There was once such a priest – you might say he was the high priest of this sort of high camp: Harry Williams. Charles Sisson wrote of him: “‘Few people,’ said *The Mothers’ Union Journal*, can make being human more thrilling, more worthwhile and more fun’.” As the great Sisson commented, “It is a reputation to live down.”

Anyhow, in Father Williams’ autobiography he relates how he “...pored over a catalogue from *Mowbrays* which had candlesticks and candles of all sizes, censers and incense-containers, tabernacles, aumbries, pyxes, bottles with holy corks and holy spoons for holy oil, chalices, patens, crucifixes, statues of the Virgin, pries-dieux, copes, chasubles, albs, girdles, cottas, birettas, soutanes – the lot.” In what must surely be a revealing phrase, Williams describes these things as “having a compulsive attraction as if they were a kind of ecclesiastical pornography” – what, if I may be so indelicate to describe it, as lace-nick and old arse. Williams began his probationary year as a deacon by becoming a scoutmaster and took the boys camping in Berkshire – but was granted some respite from the burnt potatoes or whatever it was the boy-scouts ate – for the vicar of the rural parish in which they had encamped had been a chef at *Claridges*. But then, as he pointed out, “It was a Trinity College living.”

Of course it’s easy to make fun of this sort of stuff, but vestments – the outward appearance of religion – have a serious side which is a million miles from silly old Harry Williams and the adolescent camp fantasies of the St Stephen’s House brigade.

First of all and at the lowest level, vestments are like school uniform. School uniforms were invented so that rich kids could not swagger about in superior clothing to that of the poor kids. Everybody was levelled, rightly, to the same. When you see me at the

high altar in the glorious vestments which are the pride and joy of our church – and many of them incidentally bought for us by John Gaze our parish clerk – when you see me at the altar there, the glorious apparel is not my adornment. It is simply the school uniform of the priest. You do not see the individual Peter Mullen. You see the priest. Anonymous. A functionary in his uniform.

Let us look at some of these garments. The chasuble is the paenula of the Greek and Roman era. It was worn by priests at the Holy Communion from the earliest times and it is prescribed in Cranmer's 1549 Prayer Book and its usage taken for granted by the ornaments rubric of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. The undergarment, the white alb, is a symbol of purity and when the unworthy priest puts it on he prays, "O Lord make me white as this garment." My God, when you contemplate what you are about to do at the altar, you need some clothing like this.

And that prayer has been prayed since the days of St Thomas Aquinas. Such strength of tradition is a great comfort and encouragement to the priest as he prepares to celebrate the Holy Communion. I wonder what you think the priest feels like when he leads this service. I'll tell you: terrified, overawed, unworthy. Any scrap of solidarity he can get from a long tradition helps him through what is frankly always a traumatic experience. Think about it: how can anyone stand there and say the words of Christ, "This is my body...this is my blood..." without feeling thunderstruck - and absurd?

The stole is a lovely priestly and humane garment. I especially love its use in the marriage service when I tie the couple's hands after the vows and say, "Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." This stole I wear today was a gift to me when I came to St Michael's. It was made in the south of France in the 18th century. All those prayers it has accompanied over all those years. These add weight and dignity to our worship and remind us that we are an eternal church, united with our brothers and sisters past, present and yet to come: the church on earth and the church in heaven.

The bell which I have taken to ringing at the holiest part of the service is not a mere ornament, or a piece of flashy show. It is certainly not done to express a Roman Catholic connection. As we learn from the Prayer Book, we can be catholic without being Roman Catholic. And as the Salvation Army man said, "Why should the devil have all the best tunes?" The bell is rung at the consecration of the bread, again at the consecration of the wine and a third time at the invocation of the Holy Ghost. These three moments are the nearest you will get to heaven on earth. This is the echo on earth of the constant sanctus bell *in Paradisum*. And this is why we mark them with the sound of the bell. Three moments of supreme joy and thanksgiving for what Our Lord has done for us.

Why bother with vestments, bells and the like at all? The short answer is that you have to wear something or the congregation would have a nasty shock. So many extreme protestants say that outward appearances don't matter – but then they wouldn't be seen dead without their Geneva gown; as others wouldn't be seen without their little white gloves. Do we really want to welcome Our Lord in a lounge suit, as if he were the Mayor of Stockport? Why, we even put on morning dress when we visit the Drapers' Hall. And Lo, Our Lord is worth many Drapers. We wear vestments

because the faith is not merely an *idea*. It is the embodiment of truth *Et incarnatus est*, remember. The word is made flesh and we are sensual creatures of flesh and blood.

This means that the outward forms not only symbolise but also embody the reality to which they point. If we can have a holy book – the Bible – we can have also holy things with which to adorn and beautify the Lord's Table. And not just one chasuble in white – but chasubles in green, purple, red and black to commemorate the whole passage of the church's year with its moods, meanings and senses – everything in life and towards death. To deny these things is as if one should turn to Titian or Raphael and say, "Oh just *tell* us about what you were going to paint – we don't actually need to *see* the painting!"

We are creatures of flesh and blood. The miracle is that God in Christ became flesh and blood. As the heavenly became, for our sakes, earthly, so shall the earthly put on the garments of heaven. And our Jesus is lovely, beautiful beyond measure. Let us celebrate his beauty then with all colours, lights and sounds. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Let the whole earth stand in awe of him. Amen