

July 2010

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

I begin by drawing your attention to our plans for the Annual Requiem in November which will take place this year on Saturday, 13 November at 11.00 a.m. at St John's Church, 59 Washington Street, Newport, Rhode Island. The Council will meet on Friday, 12 November at five o'clock. Father Trent Fraser, a long time member of the Council, will be our host in his lovely church by the sea. We had the Annual Requiem last at St John's in 2001, and as I was just there preaching on the Feast of Corpus Christi, I can assure you that the people are as kind and welcoming as ever. St John's has a new branch of the Guild, dedicated to St Nicholas, the patron of sailors, and although we are sure that many of their people will be present, we are also hoping for visitors from our branch at St Stephen's, Providence, and perhaps even some from All Saints', Ashmont, Boston. If you are reading these words and will be in Southern New England that weekend or the northern metropolitan area of New York, please do make the pilgrimage to be with us and pray for the Guild's dead. An added special treat is that Father Robert Farmer, SSC, Vicar of St Mary's, Wellingborough, Northants, and a member of the English Guild's Council, will be with us to represent the English Guild and to preach. A few years ago, I visited Father in his jewel-like church, the living figment of the imagination of Sir Ninian Comper, and he has also visited my church and the Guild's National Shrine, when he was in New York on study leave a year or two ago. He has also visited Denver for the SSC Synod in 2001, so he has seen "real America" as well as New York! We look forward to Father's visit for its renewal of the connection to the Guild in the Mother Country, and I know you will also find meeting him and hearing him preach a treat.

Not long ago, an elderly member of Resurrection's congregation died. Well over eighty years old, her death was hardly a shock, but of course her surviving relations felt the sting of death just the same. As it happened, she had received Viaticum at home just days before her death (though we did not know it was to be her last reception of the Blessed Sacrament at the time). As a result, she had come to her death with all that the Church had to offer her: fortified by the Blessed Sacrament and earlier by the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, and long ago by her Baptism and Confirmation, which together formed her as a Christian, and having had the Sacrament of Penance at her disposal when the need arose, she was as ready for death as it was in the Church's power to make her. And then came the funeral.

The interview I had with her surviving relations was, I'm afraid, completely typical of the kind of interview that is frequently taking place now at these times (also with couples to be married – but that is another topic!). Though the deceased was a faithful churchman, none of her children or their spouses are, and though entirely well-meaning, they approached the funeral services from an entirely different place than does the Church, and with a completely different set of pre-suppositions. Our first hurdle was that they expected to have a meeting to "plan the service", by which they meant that they intended to tell the Church what they wanted. When I explained that the Church has a set of rites for funerals, that they are printed in books (I furnished them with copies of the Anglican Missal and the BCP 1979), and that these formed the framework for any planning, they were completely shocked. As often happens now, they had approached the whole exercise as consumers buying a service, who therefore have the right to tailor the service to their desires. They were not, and are not, bad people, they simply had no conception of what we were there to do – and why would they? They had no living connection to the Church whatsoever.

Once the general form of the services offered was understood, I had to express our policy that communicants of this Church have funeral services that include Requiem Masses. Their reaction was that this would probably prolong the service, and to ask whether it was “necessary”. Here we had another problem in understanding. To them, the Requiem Mass was simply time-consuming and had no meaning of its own, they had no conception that it “did” anything for their mother, and therefore saw it only as a distraction and a waste of time. They found, furthermore, that its constant discussion of sin, death, resurrection and eternal life had neither meaning nor resonance with them. What they wanted to do was “celebrate their mother”. What this was going to mean came clear moments later, when out came a list of her favourite music (including Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*), poetry (Wordsworth’s *Daffodils*), and a list of speakers who were planning to talk about her life and interests. I say this all not to ridicule her family, since they were well intentioned, good people, nor indeed to attack others who have this kind of funeral. In a secular context, this sort of memorial service may be a very good and salutary thing, especially with public figures like Walter Cronkite, Kitty Carlisle and Bill Buckley, all of whom have had just this kind of thing recently. What it is not, however, is the Church’s service for her people. I suppose I don’t need to wrap up this lengthy account by saying that none of this happened at the funeral in question in our church. The service was from the BCP 1979, and all music and readings were texts from Scripture, the Prayer Book or the Church’s ancient liturgy, and the brief sermon had to do with the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

An Organist and Choir Master recently told me that his Rector had given permission for a funeral to feature a “set” of 1930s popular music that was beloved of the deceased. When he expressed his stunned amazement, he was told that the decision had been made for “pastoral reasons”. Even in to-day’s environment, this shocked me, as the whole idea is an impossible one and has nothing whatsoever to do with the Church’s pastoral care of its people.

A pastor, of course, is a shepherd of sheep. A Greek term for this is *episkopos* which becomes our English word “bishop”, and means one who has oversight, and more especially, oversight of sheep. So it is that the bishop is the chief pastor of a diocese, and the parish priests are the local pastors. Anyone who comes to my church more than once or twice will encounter a very unusual sight: the Organist’s huge white fluffy dog named Louis. Louis is a Great Pyrenees dog, and these dogs live in the very rugged mountains between France and Spain. The dogs have one job and one job alone: guarding and protecting sheep and goats in conjunction with the pastors. They work with a herding dog, the Pyrenean sheepdog, but the Great Pyrenees doesn’t herd – he guards, and does so with the pastor. The pastor and the guard dog work together to guard the sheep and the goats from wolves and bears, from unsafe rocky ledges, from falling, and from going into areas where there is no water or no grazing. The dogs are fearless: any Great Pyrenees dog can kill a wolf in moments, and can hold off a bear until either another dog comes or the pastor, and then the two can, and will, kill the bear. Both the pastor and the dog will put their lives on the line for the sheep and goats to protect and defend them, and to direct them away from harm. *That* is what a pastor does. The pastor does not ask his sheep where they would like to go today, what they would like to eat, nor does he watch as they do something dangerous they ought not to do. In essence, there are two dogs helping the Pyrenean pastor: the shepherd dog which urges and encourages the sheep and goats to stay together (this is the function people most often think of when thinking of pastors), but there is also the guard dog which together with the pastor makes decisions which often overrule the flock’s desires or inclinations, because the pastor and the dog know better. The pastor knows more about the situation because of his training and his calling, and he can make certain that the sheep do what they need to do and are kept from what they

ought not to do. He knows how to make certain they are fed and watered and not falling down a cliff. He also protects them from ravening wolves and bears who may appear at any time.

You may think all this characterisation is overly dramatic, and yet it is precisely the language used by Our Lord in the Gospel of John. It is also the source for the title Pastor for parish priests, one of our most cherished, and sharing in his priesthood, we also share in Our Lord's title of Good Shepherd. The duty of the shepherd is never simply to agree with everything the sheep want to keep them happy, quite the contrary. In situations like the one described above, simply agreeing with the "sheep" who come after a beloved relation's death is doing them no favour. The Church has everything to offer the communicant (the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Extreme Unction and Penance, a lifetime of teaching and preaching, guidance in private prayer and spirituality, the community of the faithful fellow pilgrims, and the intercession of Our Lady and all the Saints). The Church also has everything to offer her sheep in death. We have the Church's rites and ceremonies, all of which make vivid the passage of the soul from this life to the next. We recite the promises of Our Lord and recall his example in passing from his Passion and Death to his Resurrection and Ascension, all of which is our hope, too. We have the Scripture, the Church's ancient liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer, the treasury of hymnody and sacred music, the support of fellow Christians attending these services and the assurance of their prayers, and the knowledge that as the beloved child of God passes to the next stage of life, not only the whole court of Heaven, but we ourselves, pray for their constant growth in Christ. What more could anyone ask? If, because of our misguided "pastoral approach", we fail to offer these real consolations, and offer instead secular music, secular poetry, reminiscences of days gone by in the life of the deceased, amusing stories, and photographs of a body now or soon to be destroyed by corruption, we shall have failed miserably. This is not the work of a pastor, but a charlatan who has sold his birthright for a pottage of lentils, and hasn't yet realised the loss. The work of the Guild of All Souls is to teach the Church's children what wonderful and essential things she has to offer both the dead and the surviving, and to urge the clergy everywhere to be fearless and bold in making plain the priceless pearls of our spiritual and theological heritage, which come as gifts from the hand of God Himself.

Now the postscript. How did the relations of my elderly lady parishioner feel after the funeral for their mother and grandmother which was nothing like what they had at first planned? They thought it was absolutely wonderful; her son said to me, "Now I see what you were talking about, it's all about my mother's future, not her past." I couldn't have put it better myself. If you doubt what the Guild's ministry is, there it is in a nutshell – teaching that to the Church.

Yours in the Holy Souls,