

**Sermon given in The Church of the Resurrection, New York
at the Guild of All Souls Annual Mass, Saturday, 14 November 2015
by The Rt Rev'd The Lord Bishop of Richborough,
Dr Norman Banks, who is also President of the English Guild.**

From St Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians: "Brethren: Behold I shew you a mystery..."

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "From the beginning the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God."

For twelve years, I had the privilege of being the Parish Priest in Walsingham, with six mediaeval churches and latterly as Rural Dean with overall care of forty-nine. That part of Norfolk has one of the highest concentrations of mediaeval buildings in Northern Europe and you are barely out of sight of a tower or spire.

But it is not a particularly Christian part of England, and the churches apart from the usual round of baptisms, weddings and funerals are rarely used by the local population. Most worshippers are incomers, the recently retired, and week-enders.

After a few years of pondering why it was so hard to make any impact on the local community, I realised that the interiors of these East Anglian Churches still carried the wounds of violence from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century "Reformation". Stained glass windows smashed, altars broken, shrines desecrated, rood screens defaced. In one of my churches, All Saints East Barsham, the Chantry Chapel had been deliberately destroyed and the stone reused in the local manor house.

The cult of praying for the dead ruthlessly suppressed as well so much Catholic practice and belief. Misguided enthusiasm that still echoes down through the centuries, feeding prejudice and impeding evangelism.

Last month, I organised a conference back in Walsingham for recently ordained clergy of our tradition to explore being Catholic in the new landscape of the Church of England. And on a beautiful autumn afternoon, we gathered in the ruins of the mediaeval abbey and together prayed the prayers of reparation. For the healing of

the past. For the restoration and renewal of Catholic Practice. For a recognising, believing and living out the reality that our Christian devotional life not only informs our present but affects our eternity.

It is my work with the Guild of All Souls in England that brings me to worship with you to-day. And never has the work of the Guild been more vital as we seek to reclaim the Christian funeral and offer the rich gift that is Catholic Privilege and Practice. In this holy church this morning, we consciously enter sacred time and space. Symbolically, we offer to God everything we have received from him. Our senses, our intellect, our emotions.

We are born for heaven and here we experience it now. Mind, heart and soul united in grace filled time. This is divine encounter. This is the corruptible put on incorruption. This is the Kingdom in-breaking.

T. S. Eliot (who else!)...in *Little Gidding*:

"You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying. And what the dead had no speech for, when living, they can tell you, being dead: the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living. Here, the intersection of the timeless and nowhere. Never and always."

So then. As our worship this morning unfolds and as we make preparation to eat the leaven that is incorruptible. Let our hearts be filled with thankfulness, love and praise...

The mystery is ours! The treasure is ours! The truth is ours! Here, now....At the intersection of time and timeless, we, though mortal, put on immortality And for this and for so, so much more – most surely – thanks be to God. Amen.