

St Frideswide

Isaiah 61.10-62.5; I John 2.15-17; Matthew 13.10-16

‘The world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever’

To ask the newest canon to preach at this Patronal Eucharist is to ensure that she is properly inducted into the legend of our founder Frideswide, and so into the extraordinarily fruitful life that her story has generated here. Mention of Frideswide can raise a smile – it is such an awful name! And the legend of a lustful king, a chase through the woods, night journeys down the river, healed maidens and lepers could take us into a world which it might be easy for us to dismiss as either fantasy or nostalgia.

But perhaps we should not dismiss the legend too lightly. On a Monday shortly after I was installed here I was presiding at Holy Communion in the Lucy chapel when I saw one of the prayer cards from beside the shrine. It was a scribbled request for prayer, naming some fifteen or so individuals – if had realized there were so many I probably wouldn’t have started reading them out – but what struck me was that the prayer was addressed not to God but to St Frideswide. Whatever one makes of that it is striking evidence that in spite of the zeal of the sixteenth century reformers to suppress such practices there are still those for whom it is natural to share one’s concerns with the local saint.

For that visitor St Frideswide was the local manifestation of the holy, of the eternal world which is invisible and yet is always breaking in on this one if only we have eyes to see. In one sense all saints are the same; they are people who live from the perspective of eternity. That’s why we show them with halos; they are lit up from within with a light that does not fade down the years. ‘The world and its desire’ pass away all the time, and our lives are taken up by the world and its desires all the time, but the saints want something else, they want it so much that it becomes their reward. They are lustful for God, greedy for God, restless for God. Deeply unsatisfied persons and troubling people to have around and yet, ‘but those who do the will of God live for ever’.

Although we can generalize about saints there is also a sense in which saints are entirely individual, entirely themselves. I don’t find it difficult to believe that behind the fragmentary legends of Frideswide’s life there could have been a real and particular person. What comes through from all accounts of Frideswide’s life is her refusal to accept her fate. In the shorter version of her legend she is a king’s daughter who is unwilling to marry. She is pursued by a randy king who has a thing about virgins. In a longer version she has taken up the religious life when she is pursued by a seducer who has a name, Algar, and he obviously has a thing about nuns.

Whichever version you prefer Frideswide refuses to play ball. She will not be controlled by custom or by force. Instead she makes a bid for freedom. And this was not just a matter of ego, the tantrums of an indulged daughter, or if it started that way, that was not where it ended up. In the longer legend her flight from the unfortunate Algar is preceded

by a demonic episode, the devil appears in gold and silver claiming to be Christ himself. This episode is told I think to show that Frideswide's refusal to submit lay in real discernment. The devil smelt rotten to her. She got the whiff of sulphur, and she knew that life, real life, lay in the opposite direction. 'The world and its desire are passing away'.

From her refusal to submit to her fate came her vocation, her destiny, or perhaps vocation and destiny came first and empowered her refusal to submit to her fate. The beginnings and outcomes of divine action are not always easy to distinguish. But the legend is clear that even in lifetime there were miracles of healing. A miraculous spring, comfort for the distressed, relief for those who were anxious. Even at her funeral there were miracles. Yet when you look at the brief sources of her life it is difficult to know where to place her. One story places her in Binsey another in Bampton. She seems to have had the kind of life which involves moving about. She escaped her would-be attacker by boat, she returns to Oxford by boat; the famous portrayal of her life in the Latin chapel depicts her soul on its way to heaven by boat. She is in transit, constant transformation.

And that suggests to me that Frideswide's holiness was not a static thing but a result of her willingness to be blown about by the Spirit of God, lifted up here and set down there. It is being – and you really need the French word *disponible* to express this - it doesn't work in English you then get the rather misleading word, 'disposable'. You could translate this as 'available' to God, but it is more active than that. It is seeing the ocean and the boat and getting into the boat. It is praising the wind that blows you off your feet. It is an attitude expressed in the prayer at the heart of the Methodist Covenant Service: 'I am non longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will, put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you or laid aside for you' That is what it means to be *disponible*. It is a readiness to become and do what God calls you to, hour by hour, moment by moment. It means in the end surrendering the control of one's own life, not because you are a wimp and want others to run your life for you, but because you have come to a point where you trust the *source* of life, more than you trust your own hold on life.

It is as though you find yourself inside your own story and you discover that it is not just your own story but the story of Jesus Christ being lived through you. In the Gospel we had read this evening the disciples of Jesus ask him why he speaks in parables. And he says, 'To you has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given'. The secret is whether you long and thirst for life, for truth, for goodness, or whether you remain closed in on yourself, self-satisfied, defended, untroubled by the howling tempest of desire within and without.

Frideswide somehow got inside the story of her life and found Christ there, and that's why her life became fruitful and produced the future which we share today in this city, cathedral and university. It has been a rich inheritance, material as well as intellectual and spiritual, 'To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance'. Yet she challenges us if we reduce her legacy to material wealth and power. None of this can last without being renewed at the well-spring, without the life of those willing to deny

themselves, to seek a reality beyond the desire of this world which is passing away. It was because she broke through to a life not limited by her own limitations that the memory of Frideswide outlasted her life, and why her deeds and miracles also continued after her death. And why the person who passed through the cathedral a few weeks ago, asked her to pray for him. His prayer to her, to the Christ in her. May St Frideswide pray for us as we seek to find the living Christ in the story of our own lives, this day and every day.