

SHRIVEN FOR REBIRTH

Cakes and Ale Service

St. Paul's Cathedral

Shrove Tuesday

Tuesday 13th February 2018

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‘Therefore, after her child was born, and not believing she would live, she sent for her confessor, fully wishing *to be shriven of her whole lifetime*, as near as she could.’

That tiny extract comes from a most extraordinary piece of writing only rediscovered in the 1930s, having been lost since mediaeval times, when it was in the possession of the Carthusians at Mount Grace Priory in North Yorkshire. It is the *Book of Margery Kempe* and you could say that it was written for this very day, *Shrove Tuesday*. For Margery sought to be shriven on countless occasions – in myriad places - by humble priests, by monks, by bishops and archbishops – both throughout this land and then, across the mediaeval world, on pilgrimage to Scandinavia, Santiago de Compostela, to Rome, Assisi and Jerusalem.

It is a remarkable book, an autobiography dictated to a priest, a clerk in holy orders, in about 1440. He was the scribe for an illiterate but unconscionably devout woman from Kings Lynn. She was then perhaps seventy years of age. The book is also a unique record and insight into life in a mediaeval English town and then abroad – way across the seas. Margery was no Brexiteer! She did indeed survive the birth of that child and of thirteen more. At the age of 40 she took a vow of perpetual chastity much to her husband’s annoyance. Who would have wanted to swap places with her parish priest, Robert Spryngolde, at St. Margarets, Lynn, however - for she also had the *gift of tears*. She cried and screamed through most of the Masses she attended. Her fellow pilgrims to Spain, Italy and Jerusalem soon tired of her presence and their many insults are recorded in vivid detail!

So, as we can see from Margery - being shriven, confessing one's sin - was a serious business. It makes Shrove Tuesday feel like Margery's patronal feast. The frolics of the good burghers of Olney with their pancake race are a far cry from the seriousness of 'this creature' as she describes herself in the book.

Yet, despite all this, there was another much brighter side to her devotions. In her quieter, more contemplative moments, time, time, time and again, she thought and dreamed of heaven. It was this and her love of her Lord - which she describes in great richness - that drove her on endless pilgrimages in an age when transport and hospitality were hard and grim. But what on earth can this say to us, in a world where seriousness of *this sort* would be seen as little short of lunacy? Let us return us to our readings – set specifically for this season.

In the passage we heard, people focus, almost always, on just the first line with its emphasis on fasting, weeping and mourning. But *most central* to that piece, are two uplifting phrases. First of all: ‘return to me with all your *heart* – *rend your hearts* and not your garments.’ Then immediately after that: ‘Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and *abounding in steadfast love...*’

So, the intention behind all Margery's *shriving* was a real desire to come closer to God, and to help her fellow human beings – she showed constant care for those around her – even for those who (perhaps understandably) insulted her because of her extraordinary behaviour.

Our second reading is one of the most inspiring pieces in the New Testament. Here is St. Paul at his most lyrical. Initially, he strikes the same note as that first reading: ‘We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.’ And then, in spirited words, he describes the life that all of us – that is all humanity – are called to live:

‘.... as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities ... tumults, labours ... by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God,’

It's a clarion call to revisit the cardinal virtues, to be endowed with a character which - looks outward to others, shows limitless generosity, deepens our lives by adhering to that which matters, and matter *most* in human life. The diametrical opposite to fake news and post-truth, it scorns shallow engagement and triviality - so often the products of unrestrained individualism. We live in an increasingly dangerous world, but, as St. Paul indicates in his later lines, that is hardly a new experience. He writes:

‘... in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute - we are the imposters who speak the truth, we are unknown, yet well known; dying and behold we live, we are punished and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor yet making many rich – *penniless, we own the world.*’

These words should ring out to Stationers. For, from the beginning this is what we have been about. John Norton, in his legacy and will establishing this service in 1612, four hundred years ago, wrote: ‘the revenue shall weekly benefit twelve poor people, six of the company and six of this parish.’ He gave a substantial sum to secure the first Stationers’ Hall. His legacy later endowed Stationers’ School – once again aimed at the poor of the Stationers’ trade. Ironically, our very *raison d’être* then, is captured in St. Paul’s words, ‘penniless we own the world.’

Few of us, like Margery Kempe, will be shriven on this *shriving day of all days!* But this season reminds us of stark contrasts in our world, focused in our readings and in Margery's extraordinary biography, contrasts which we can help redress. With pathos, Jean Watt captures these contrasts in a poetic reflection on Lent:

'Lent is a taking down, a stripping bare...
Leaving no hiding place, only an emptiness
Between black branches, a most precious space
Before the leaf, before the time of flowers;
Lest we should see only the leaf, the flower,
Lest we should miss the stars.'

Shrove Stationers – whatever we do, we dare not miss the stars.

Amen

Readings:

Joel. 2. 12-17

II. Cor. 5. 20b- 6. 10