

Homily for All Saints Day 2018

King's College Chapel

People go to Rome for different things. There are the extensive remains of buildings from the glory days of the Roman Empire: one of those periods of history which, like the Tudors for us, seems to exert unending fascination. But when I go, I rarely bother with the Forum. I am simply drawn to the many, many churches. It's a bit of a cliché, I suppose. A priest goes on a church crawl. But they are remarkable. Remarkable for their architecture, for the works of art you suddenly come face-to-face with; and remarkable for being places irradiated with prayer. Prayer and worship have happened there from the days of their foundation to the present. They are not just heritage sites, in just the same way that this Chapel is not. The prayer goes on. The desire for God goes on. The atmosphere, the very walls, the people thrum with this holy exchange of divine life.

In those churches in Rome you come to face to face with the saints. They are dedicated to specific saints. There are paintings of them: I always make for S Luigi Francese, which has not one but three Caravaggios of S Matthew. And there are the earthly remains of them too: caskets of relics, bones, even entire bodies, usually housed in the most sacred part of the church – under the altar. You can see the arm of S Francis Xavier, with which he baptised and blessed thousands on his missionary journeys (the rest of him is in Goa). You can see one of the most beautiful of baroque sculptures in Santa Cecilia: an image of her lying in death, exquisitely beautiful and poignant, over the place where her actual body lies. If we had another patron saint here, it would be her, to guard our musical life.

My favourite is one of the simplest. In the Santi Apostoli, the Church of the Twelve Apostles, not a very prepossessing place, you can go down some marble steps under the high altar and you come into a silent, half-dark crypt. As your eyes adjust, you see a recess in which sits a sarcophagus. There is a place to kneel, and a sign which simply says who lie within: Philip and James, Apostles. They are the bones of men who were with Jesus himself.

Let that sink in for a moment.



It is far too easy to dismiss this as sentimental or even superstitious nonsense. Such is the routine response of evangelistic atheists and evangelical Christians alike. Now of course there are real temptations, and we have to be on our guard. The Christian way is about mystery, not magic. But in that mystery, or universe of mysteries, is a fundamental belief. It is as crucial to the operation of our faith as the bones of those saints were in enabling them to walk alongside Jesus and listen to him. I'm talking about the articulating truth which is - the physicality of our faith. God so loved the world that he gave himself to it, he became flesh in the person of Jesus. This reaching into the ordinary, mundane stuff of human life tells us how much that ordinary stuff matters. It matters to God, so it should matter to us. The fullness of God's saving, loving involvement in the world means that those collections of bones in so many Roman churches may be literally inert: but they are alive with meaning. They have traces of the sacramental, because they are vectors of the divine.

Sometimes we just have to get out of our heads and into our hearts a bit more. Most of the saints we venerate today knew this, and it cost many of them their lives. May they pray for us, as we struggle along the path towards the place where they are now.