

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

Rourke's Drift Service

Sunday 18 January 2015

John 1. 43-end: Philip and Nathanael

The Very Revd Dr Paul Shackerley

Dean of Brecon

It is a great honour to stand with my predecessors to continue your heritage of the regiment to make sure that this unique service continues into future generations. As a popular and pervasive symbol of the 19th Century, the immortelle flowers performed an emblematic function at all levels of society, which included a role in representing national sorrow. Wreaths Immortelles were markers of continuity in a world challenged by uncertainty and change, and the symbolism of the Immortelles flowers take root in the collective memories of the nation. Samuel Clemens, whose pen name was Mark Twain, wrote: 'The immortelle requires no attention: you just hang it up, and there you are; just leave it alone,' he wrote, 'it will take care of your grief for you, and keep it in mind better than you can'.¹ It would be so easy for us to overlook Queen Victoria's gesture and the symbol of the wreath immortelles against the Colours laid in this Cathedral in perpetuity. It was a common custom of the day in the 19th Century.

Almost two decades before Queen Victoria adorned her Colour with the silver Wreath of Immortelles to the 1st Battalion 24th Regiment of Foot after the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, the French Emperor is depicted in an issue of *The Illustrated London News* featuring an engraving of a scene from the annual French Emperor's Fête, during which the procession of old soldiers of the First Empire each placed crowns of immortelles on the railings surrounding the base. In the 1980s Queen Victoria's silver wreath was stolen from Brecon Cathedral and later found in the River Honddu not far from the Cathedral. Lost and found symbolism of the Buffalo and Honddu rivers, connecting the present with the past.

There is documented evidence that placing Wreaths of Immortelles flowers, claimed to have healing properties and known for not losing their colour, were common in the 19th Century. What is interesting about the practice of laying immortelles flowers is they decorated churches during the Easter season. Why? Because they were symbols of life, evoking the Resurrection of Jesus. This practice eventually stretched beyond the walls of the Church to make up the funeral wreathes laid at the graves of the departed. Today, of course, they have little or no relation to resurrection in the collective mind of this

¹ From Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain, *Life in the Mississippi*.

post-Christian country. In 1898 the poet Laura G. Collins's poem *Immortelles and Asphodels (Everlastings)* wrote how public expressions of grief have traversed our history. She wrote:

These, our Earth's perennial flowers;
The fadeless blooms by Poets sung,
Songs, that from Homer's Age till ours,
Down the aisles of Time have rung;
In many an emblem do we weave

Conventional expressions of grief by an individual, but also the aesthetic treatment of emblems by society and nations, have become part of British expressions of mourning. The act of returning to the social order after war, resigning ourselves to loss, where like our 19th Century ancestors, we lay wreaths of immortelles as an expression of national mourning and grief. We have seen images of passionate grief through the acts of thousands of people coming to see the place that unites a nation's grief, like the laying of pens alongside flowers, as a modern expression of the wreath of immortelles in Paris after the recent atrocities. Collins went on to write:

For passionate Remembrance' sake;
And howe'er we joy, howe'er we grieve,
Sacred pilgrimages make;
For Loss and Grief, the *Everlastings*
On our graves we mourning lay;
For Memory, the Immortelles;
Our loved ones live for us always.
Death in Life, Life in Death—how we
This, Love's Faith, keep reverently.

The reading set for today from John's Gospel, tells a story of the sceptical and cynical Nathanael. John is the only Gospel author to mention Nathanael. That is what lays behind his comment 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' when invited by Philip to come and see Jesus of Nazareth. It was a sleepy village that had nothing going for it. We know there are sceptics around, who have variable and contrary views of the morality and truth narrative surrounding the Anglo-Zulu war. The pulpit is not the place to comment on contrasting views. Like Philip, who didn't defend Jesus or his claims; today we do not need to throw up complex moral arguments about the Anglo-Zulu war.

There were political, as well as moral questions raised. Philip did not try to argue Nathaniel into his own confession that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. He simply said, 'Come and see.' He disarmed Nathaniel's defences and got Nathanael's attention and curiosity.

So, when teaching a new generation about this historical war, our task will be to present the history and facts, to invite them to 'come and see' not only the Colours, windows, and plaques in this holy place, but also the great resource of our Military Museum in Brecon. Come and see as tourists to become pilgrims and learners. Both are great resources of history and learning for a new generation. I am committed to engage more fully in education, school visits and tours of tourists that they become pilgrims, not just tourists. That they will come and see.

This annual service is 'for memory, the immortelles,' as Collins put it in his poem. It is an invitation like that of Philip to the sceptical Nathanael with the disarming invitation, 'come and see'. Every January the Cathedral invites you to 'come and see' again not only the story of the Anglo-Zulu war and mark the passing of lives on both sides of the slaughter, but the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which found expression in the 19th Century Wreath of Immortelles. We see the wreath of immortelles; that is a reminder that the immortelle placed on the Colours by Queen Victoria is a pointer to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, common in the 19th Century, and a custom that exists today as immortelles are placed at the scenes of tragic road accidents and destructive acts of terrorism, as well as on our Remembrance Sunday and funeral services. So, let Collins's poem have the last word, for I believe this is a most fitting poem that gives expression of why we make our sacred pilgrimage each year to this holy place every January:

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Sacred pilgrimages make;
For Loss and Grief, the *Everlastings*
On our graves we mourning lay;
For Memory, the Immortelles;
Our loved ones live for us always.
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This, Love's Faith, keep reverently.

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