

It is truly remarkable at times that the church both recognises and celebrates people from the past of whom we know very little.

There are countless lesser festivals in the church calendar which we can celebrate reminding us of the past endeavours of those who have lived and given loyal service to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the week gone by on the 15th July what is recognised as a lesser festival in the wider church is the feast day of St. Swithun.

Now I am sure that you have probably heard all about St. Swithun over the years, but then again perhaps not, as there really is not much to be told.

Here is what Exciting Holiness has to say:

Three key points emerge from this short extract on the life of St. Swithun:

Simplicity, Holiness and Long Summer Storms:

I am sure that many of you present when you go on your holidays pop into the odd Cathedral here and there, I have been to countless cathedrals and worshipped and worked in several throughout my ministry.

One of the things which is so clearly evident within them are the tombs of previous Bishops, and other notables, including royalty.

These are normally very grand and give status and significance to those whom they are designed to honour and remember. Notable examples I have seen are the tomb of St. Andrew the Apostle, whose relics are stored elaborately in the Cathedral in Amalfi, the tomb of St Cuthbert in the Cathedral in Durham and of course the tomb of St Thomas a Beckett, in Canterbury Cathedral.

The tomb of St Andrew is placed within a magnificent 9th century Romanesque-Baroque building in the Piazza del Duomo, it glistens with gold leaf and is truly magnificent. It attracts millions of pilgrims every year and speaks about the power of the Church to overcome the trials and temptations, and earthly afflictions which come upon so many humbler souls in their lifetimes. Yet this tomb is a far cry from the tomb requested by St. Swithun.

We then consider the tomb of St Cuthbert whose body lay in the parish church in Chester-le-street for many years until marauders from abroad made that destination unsafe, so the monks carried his body to Durham and he was housed in a little wooden chapel until the new magnificent cathedral was built in his honour and was ready to take his body. Many of you will I am sure be well aware of the miraculous nature of his preservation, as before placing him into his new grand tomb his coffin was opened to ensure that the Saint's body was indeed inside. When opened his body was perfectly preserved and this was to secure his place and prestige as a man recognised as being holy in the eyes of God that even death could not corrupt him. A moving and very spiritual tomb, now holds his body situated immediately behind the High Altar.

Then we consider the tomb of St. Thomas a Beckett the Archbishop murdered in Canterbury Cathedral, this tomb was immense, and one of the richest and grandest tombs in the land. Such was its pre-eminence that it caught the eye of Henry the 8th and was plundered at the Reformation and totally removed. Now a simple candle burns in the place where it once stood. And that makes me wonder about the true power of the Church, and the message of simplicity and humility brought to us by the life of St. Swithun, whose own body was to be the source of much controversy. For at his death in 863 it was noted that the Bishop had requested that his body be buried in the outdoors where the feet of ordinary men could pass over him. A reminder to us all that no matter how elevated we may become in society, we are all equal in the eyes of God, and should seek to live our lives simply and humbly before him. In obedience to his wishes he was laid to rest at the front of the entrance to the Old Saxon Minster, where he was to rest eternally with his people for 100 years.

Then the Church intervened, he was chosen as the patron saint of a new Benedictine Monastery and his bones were removed from the ground and placed into a splendid reliquary and housed in the new Monastery. But rather like St Cuthbert in Durham this was not to be his final resting place. Again under the Normans a new magnificent cathedral was built and the reliquary in 1450 was carried in great procession to a new magnificent shrine which soon became world famous and adorned with silver, gold and jewels from grateful pilgrims.

The healing power of faith was so strong around St Swithun's bones that a special Holy Tunnel was created so pilgrims could crawl underneath his tomb and get as close as possible to his body.

Then came the Reformation and King Henry 8th plundered this tomb too, just like Canterbury leaving nothing of its former glory behind. Now a simple plaque marks the spot, and even the Holy Tunnel was filled in.

And yet there is something to be said for this simplicity and humility.

St Swithun rested for a 100 years in his simple grave and legend has it that he was so distressed at being disturbed that a great storm arose which lasted 40 days. Just as the church loves to honour those of the past, so too does it relish in legends which often have no grounding in reality at all. But that is the value of stories, and legends, for they do not have to be true in order to keep alive a message. And here in this story we are reminded that simplicity and humility are key requirements of those who are faithful followers of Jesus. There is no space for grandeur and fame in the service of the Lord. And if simplicity and humility are ignored in favour of human exaltation, then the consequences can be severe.

So live simply and humbly before God, and you shall be remembered in the hearts of others and come into his glory. Place honour, prestige and glory before you and you will face the storms of destruction which separate you from God and your fellow men and women.

Follow the example of St Swithun and allow the feet of ordinary men to walk over you, as a permanent reminder that all men and women are equal in the eyes of Almighty God.

Reverend Cive