

SERMON FOR PATRONAL FESTIVAL SUNDAY | 29.10.2017

I am not sure whether there are many copies still around but I have to hand Peter Baugh's little pamphlet on the history of St James' entitled '*My Trust is in God alone*', the motto on the Clothworkers coat of arms. I am currently rewriting the Church website and I needed to look up some details of our past.

But what interested me was Peter's Epilogue which reads as follows: *One day in Sion College, Fr Jack handed me a book called 'Walks in Islington' dated 1835. 'There might be something useful being said about the land on which the new Church of St James' was built in 1875' he said. With disbelief I read on: The road called Frog Lane (which we now know as Prebend Street) is likely to have been part of Ermine Street, constructed by the Romans. This road, coming out of the fort at Cripplegate (which was near where the old St James' was built on the corner of Wood Street and Monkwell Square) ran up City Road, then through Frog Lane and into Lower Road (now Essex Road) on into Highbury before it made its way to Verulamium, the present city of St Albans. The 1835 guide went on: the Romans would almost certainly have used a path first cut by the early Britons since they always chose the easiest route.*

So, concludes Peter Baugh, *Just think! Over a thousand years ago ancient feet, travelling north would have passed by the site of Lamb's Chapel (the old St James') on their left, leaving what is now Cripplegate, and they would then have passed by the site of the present St James' on their right as they made their way to St Albans.*

But of course none of them would have had any clue as to the significance of where they were walking in what would have been for several hundred more years, just a series of tracks and paths.

The same, of course, is true of the legacy of Richard Cloudesley whom we remember especially today. While much is made of the two stone fields that he left in his will in 1517, he was not to know the value of what he had done all those years ago. Zoopla tells me that the current value of a two bedroomed flat on Cloudesley Square is currently £930,000 and a four bedroomed house something over £2million!

No wonder the charity is still able to make very generous grants each year amounting to almost £1m, shared equally between health and social needs and the support of the 21 Anglican parishes in Islington Deanery. His foresight has done a simply incredible amount of good and we cannot but give profound thanks during this anniversary year – as Susan Sorensen will help us to do at the 10am Mass at which she will be the main speaker.

But, we might ask, what was the motive behind these charitable gifts? As in the small print in the will of William Lamb whose wealth still supports this Church though he died in 1580, there was a requirement that Masses to be said for the repose of his soul - in perpetuity. You might say that these very wealthy men gave their fortunes to the poor – as a way of ensuring that they escaped the fires of hell.

Which leads us to ask whether anyone gives money ‘just for its own sake?’ Is there any such thing as pure philanthropy? And if people do good for selfish reasons, does that in some way diminish their generosity? Didn’t Jesus say, *make sure you give with one hand in such a way as the other hand doesn’t know what is happening? Don’t, says Jesus, be like the Pharisees who gave in such an ostentatious fashion that they already had their reward.* Instead, he points to the poor widow in Jerusalem who gave her tiny donation without anyone having any idea what she was doing – despite it being all that she had.

So we wonder whether it is right, say, for the Bill Gates Foundation to carry the name of its founder (and there are scores of others like it); shouldn’t such philanthropy be anonymous, something done in secret? And the answer is yes.

But isn’t philanthropy with a name attached still better than a rich person spending all their money on themselves? Surely the answer also has to be yes.

Which is why, as Christians, we have to go beyond the direct giver into something deeper. In our prayers we might start with saying: thank you God, for inspiring X or Y to give their cash away – knowing that, after all, the money isn’t theirs anyway – but what we are really celebrating is less what Richard Cloudesley did than what God was able to do through him.

Isn't it exactly the same with our festivals which praise Mary the Mother of Jesus? However much she may appear to be singled out for honours, stuck up on juggernauts for people to carry around in the streets of Spain or Italy, what we are really doing is recognizing the importance of her humble obedience, her 'yes' to God's call – in her case to be the mother of Our Lord.

And us, when we give? Do we have mixed motives? Probably?! Not necessarily because we hope to escape the fires of Hell but because we don't give as generously as we can afford to – and we are often a bit partial – giving to those charities which warm our hearts rather than those which may be the most deserving.

Today's Readings, as so often, usefully bring us up short. Deuteronomy is quite explicit: just remember 90% of what you have you didn't work for! *When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to give you - a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant - take care that you do not forget the Lord who gave you all these things...*

Our celebrations of Richard Cloudesley (and of William Lamb whose 450th anniversary falls in 2019) are therefore on two levels. In the first place we are rightly thanking them for this Church and for much else that we take for granted - places of beauty which we did not build. But, secondly, we are recognizing that neither of them knew what they were doing when they made their bequests. How could Richard Cloudesley have imagined in his wildest dreams just how valuable his two stone fields would become!

Which is why our Gospel takes us beyond the bequests to the words of the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the pure in heart, says Jesus, for they will see God.* Whether we are rich or poor, it is 'who we are' that counts.

On this 500th anniversary, Richard Cloudesley's charity reminds us of our duty to care for the poor and needy among us – as a thank you for all that we have received. But let us not overlook the bigger hand at work, that what he gave away in pounds ... we are able to reap in millions. Like those Roman soldiers, he never knew the value of what he did. And nor will we when we give...