

# Icons of Christ

A sermon preached by The Rt Revd Dr John Thomson, Bishop of Selby for the Patronal Festival of St Germain at Selby Abbey on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2019

*Bible Readings: Proverbs 4 v1-9 & Matt 5 v13-19*



What a wonderful occasion on Wednesday at the Selby 950 Parade. The costumes were remarkable, the range of people involved was really encouraging and the crowds fuller than at the Tour de Yorkshire!

The weather was kind and leading all of it were the cross and the new icon of St Germain... a very religious event!

Who was St Germain?

Well like a lot of early Christian figures there isn't much to go on but what we know is that

- a) He was born in 378 in Gaul now known as France.
- b) He was given the best education he could have had and became a lawyer and soldier marrying well and eventually becoming a duke.
- c) Then he was elected Bishop by the people of Auxerre and consecrated in 418. He changed completely renouncing his marriage, giving up his wealth, founding a monastery in Auxerre and living a very austere life of fasting, penitence with a spartan diet and wearing a hair shirt under his robes.
- d) He visited the British Isles twice

First in 429 as a result of a call from the British Church to help them contest the teaching of Pelagius and recover Christian unity. During the visit he performed miracles, preached convincingly and even led the armies of the north against the Picts and Saxons winning the Hallelujah battle without any loss of blood

Second either in 437 or 445 he was called back to battle with the Pelagians again before dying between 445-8 and his body was buried in Auxerre.

To the people of the time he was an exemplary Bishop.... A man of holiness, commitment and brain power committed to the truth.

As a result a lot of churches were dedicated to him in Gaul and a good number in these islands particularly in Wales and Ireland. The Isle of Man's Cathedral is dedicated to him as is St Germain with Bodmin in Cornwall which was the original seat of the Bishop of Cornwall and the suffragan Bishop in Truro diocese is called the Bishop of St Germain's.

In Yorkshire as a result of a vision, Benedict came in 1068 to Selby with a relic of St Germain, his finger, and seeing the three swans on the Ouse as the vision suggested he would, founded his Abbey here dedicated to St Germain in 1069. As a result of links to the Abbey, Marske-by-the-Sea in Cleveland and Winestead on the Humber are also dedicated to St Germain.

So St Germain was a sort of prophetic-Christlike figure who contended for the faith.

His adversary Pelagius was actually from these Islands. According to St Jerome of desert fame, he was called 'Scotus' which meant Irish in those days since the Scots as we know them only arrived in modern Scotland in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Pelagius was a British monk with high moral standards who was horrified by the moral laxity of Rome when he visited the city. He was also a deeply pious person and was a spiritual guide or director to many.

His concern was that cheap grace and a particularly negative view of human nature undermined real moral choice and worked against a clear witness to the Gospel.

If he had read out Gospel reading from Matthew he would have said:

Just as salt mustn't lose its saltiness if it is to flavour and preserve the food, so the Church must not lose its moral distinctiveness if it is to impact on society in a godly way.

Just as a light on a hill mustn't be hidden if people are going to see it, so cheap grace and a negative view of human nature are smothering the light of Christ which needs to be seen in morally virtuous lives.

So he would have seen Jesus' teaching on keeping all the commandments as vital if this witness was to be both faithful and moral

Faithful because it was loyal to God above all else

Moral because people were freely choosing to be obedient to God and so were virtuous signs pointing to the values of heaven.

So why did Germain and the majority of the Church at the time, particularly influenced by St Augustine of Hippo in North Africa, disagree with this?

First they felt that Pelagius, like many of us Brits today, believed that people were basically good and so were not completely dependent on God's forgiveness and grace. In short they could pull themselves up by their boot laces and present their credentials at the pearly gates and be let in on the basis of their moral goodness. All that Christ and the Church needed to do was moral exhortation.

Second they felt that the depths and influence of sin were under-estimated by Pelagius. For most of the Church at the time, sin was something we inherit... it is our original state... because we are born into a world infused with sin and therefore needing to be rescued by God alone. Pelagius did not need Good Friday or the cross.

Third they believed that Grace... or the free love of God... is not cheap because it is offered by God at Good Friday cost. It is costly and generous.... rescuing us so that we can bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

So for Augustine and St Germain listening to our Gospel reading they would have said:

Salt can only be salty if it is full of God's love and grace. It is this gift poured into our hearts as St Paul says, rather than our so called good deeds that is salty.

The light on the hill is not the light of our morally good deeds freely done but the light of Christ whose love is poured into us and shines through us.

The commandments of God are fulfilled in the obedience of Christ, the true Israelite so we don't need to earn our salvation by obeying them. Instead we are now in the age of the Spirit and so are infused with the Holy Spirit so that we can express our love for God by living holy lives.

So the debate between Pelagius and Augustine/Germain is one we still have.

Which is the most important in our relationship with God: OUR DUTY, OUR CHOICE or GOD'S LOVE?

In short for Pelagius duty and choice mattered most. These which put humans at the centre and he believed showed that humans are morally responsible creatures who can choose to live godly lives

For Augustine and Germain, love is the top value, a love which sees God at the centre and they believed that humans needed the love of God poured into them if they were to live godly lives free from the shackles of sin.

Today we have blessed this icon of St Germain.

According to Archbishop Rowan Williams, icons are gateways into God.

They are pictures in action written, not painted, after prayer and fasting which invite us on a journey more deeply into God.

St Germain's story points us to Christ and the meaning of his mission to love and rescue all of creation and this love is poured into our hearts so we can live as salt, light and holy people in today's world.

His icon is therefore an invitation to join him on this journey into God as we move from just looking at him to joining in this journey.

His icon reminds us that just as Christ is the icon of God according to St Paul in Colossians 1 verse 15 so St Germain's life is an icon of Christ showing us God at work in Germain's life as he seeks to follow God's call on the road of life which is the road of love not the road of moralism.

As the Church, the Body of Christ, we too are called to be icons of Christ, like St Germain, inspiring others, as he did Benedict, to follow Christ wherever he takes them, even to Selby!

In this sense St Germain is like the parent of Proverbs 4: challenging his offspring, Benedict or us, to listen to his story, to treat this as wise counsel and to follow his example in our journeys of life since an Icon shows a human-being soaked through with the energy and action of God... a radiating picture, light and force which can transform our lives, like Christ's, into gateways into God. Amen