

ALL SAINTS' 2021

I was pleased to use a free North Norfolk Guide last week. How could we resist the entry under 'Cley (Cly) Next The Sea'? I quote: "Did you know: The magnificent St Margaret Church has it all! A woman beating someone's bare buttocks, skull and crossbones, dragons, lions with bones and medieval graffiti. Take a visit and see if you can spot them." Well, we did visit but bumped into one of the Churchwardens, an artist, with her dog and got pleasantly distracted. We heard about a recent community meeting held in the church which explored how to best exploit and enjoy a more flexible and welcoming space throughout their historic, Grade 1 listed building which, alas, attracts few regular churchgoers.

During lockdown she secretly hired a skip to get rid of all the unwanted clutter which so many of our churches seem to gather and collect over the years – and her bright smile of achievement was very encouraging indeed – an artist's eye if you like on the beauty of space over clutter, of being able to wander and move more freely, instead of bumping into clumsy, unattractive, Victorian furniture everywhere.

Of course St Margaret of Antioch whose name the Church bears would understand none of these wry observations! She is, though, a saint dear to the East (known as St Marina) as well as the West of Christendom and, as so often, there are more tales than facts, surrounding her hagiography. In art she is often represented with a dragon (representing the devil) and carrying a cross representing her saving faith. Like so

many saints before and after, Margaret did not give in to her torturers. More scholarly saints of more recent times, like John Henry Newman, never had to endure persecution or terror of that kind, any more than we do.

In preparation for yesterday's peaceful march in Woodbridge before today's COP26 summit begins (I got the wrong day, the march is **this** coming Saturday!), I put on my 'Luthersocks' as they are called, with those famous words imprinted: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

Today of all days, we should take heart that Saints are created by God for every age to light up every Christian pilgrim's journey. They do not represent human perfection as such; in so many ways they represent the clearing out of so-called 'celebrity status' and the smashing of society's expected norms or behaviour or worldly aspirations. But God's saints always inspire us as well as challenge us. Their spiritual home belongs less to their frozen images in stained glass but much more to the everyday world and everyday lives and struggles and sacrifices which all of us can relate to, and learn from.

When, last night, we invoked the prayers of the patron Saint of all things Ecological, we can say simply and quietly (not all prayer has to be spoken aloud):

"ST FRANCIS, JOYFUL STEWARD OF CREATION,
FROM YOU WE LEARN TO LIVE WITH LESS,
TO GIVE AND NOT TO TAKE."

As a congregation it would be great to think and pray and write down what individually we could do... and in two weeks' time just share, say, three BIG action points – write them down, hold them up, display them as PLEDGES, promises we can each make to stand up not just for what we believe in but also what kind of significant difference we can make. A trip to Norfolk instead of another plane trip to Madeira, a Vegetarian Monday or (if you are very brave) Sunday too?

Personally, I think it is very important to mark our 'Red Letter Days', to see what everyday ways of showing goodness, kindness, and justice for our planet look like - beginning on our own doorsteps or beginning in Whisstocks Place by the riverside. However hard we may find it to articulate our conversion to Christ and our commitment to a Gospel of Hope, there is no looking back as we look to the future of our common home, the home for which Christ suffered, died, and rose again. Each of us are following the same steps in becoming potential saints and each of us look to paradise as a pledge and promise of who we are and the practical steps and yes, risks we have already taken, to discover the joy of God's redeeming, eternal love. Here's a prayer I have stolen and found too difficult to sow into my socks:

"We thank you, O God, for the saints of all ages; For those who, in times of darkness, kept the lamp of faith burning; For the great souls who saw visions of larger truth and dared to declare it; For the multitude of quiet and gracious souls whose presence has purified and sanctified the world; and

for those we knew and loved, who have passed from this earthly fellowship into the fuller light of life with You. Amen.”