

The Sunday after the Ascension 22 May 2016 Year C

“And behold, I come quickly.” Rev 22: 12

This Sunday after the Ascension is the opportunity to look back at the moment of Our Lord’s departure from the sight of his Disciples and the sending of His Spirit, on the Feast of Pentecost, which we mark next week, and which concludes the Easter season.

And so this is something of an in-between moment, a pause, a time of waiting.

Waiting is rather what life can be about. We don’t like waiting. Do you notice how on train platforms most people prefer to stand in the cold than use a waiting room, as if pretending that a waiting room only confirms the discomfort of waiting itself.

Waiting for a bus, waiting for news, waiting for the children to leave home, waiting for them to come back again, waiting for tests, waiting for results, waiting. Waiting to be in charge, waiting not to be in charge. Waiting to give birth, waiting to die. Waiting. We can dull the waiting, we can put ear-phones on, we can play with our phones, we can download another mindless game or podcast and tell ourselves we are instructing ourselves, but the waiting does not stop.

Liturgically there is a lot of waiting. We try to cover the waiting with music and action of some kind, but essentially the liturgy is a formalised, uninhibited waiting. Waiting on the word of the God. Waiting for the kingdom to come. So that when it does, we will know it.

Do you know a very beautiful book published in 2014 by Denise Inge? It is called *A Tour of Bones*.

I hope by taking you through some of it I don’t spoil any of it, because it is a joy to read and for a short book there is a great deal in it. It is about waiting, but it starts more actively and then unfolds rather unexpectedly as during the writing she was diagnosed in her late 40s with advanced breast cancer. Two explorations take place at once and intersect and are completely compelling.

It starts with a move.

Her husband was Bishop of Huntingdon and he was translated to be Diocesan Bishop of Worcester. The Palace in Worcester is part of the old Abbey, and rather curiously in the post Dissolution re-building of the Worcester’s precincts the charnel house of the Abbey was built over but left undisrupted by the construction of the house that the Bishop now lives in.

No self respecting Abbey in medieval England or Europe was complete without a charnel house. Because digging graves is demanding business, there was an ancient practice of burial of bodies and a subsequent custom of digging them up and placing the bones tidily away in the charnel house. Because of Christian sensibilities about remains, they have been left, in their subterranean holding place and just built over and left. Mrs Inge had studied English literature and written extensively on 17<sup>th</sup> poetry, being a specialist in Thomas Traherne. Her own writing is very poetic and arrestingly direct. Her task before her illness was to find out about Charnel Houses, and go on a pilgrimage from her own, to four others across Europe.

It's a travelogue, account of a pilgrimage, and an exploration of death, burial and Christian hope – in short waiting.

From this belly of our house I began a quest into fear so that I might overcome it and about living life unfrightened. I started this book scared of the skeletons in my cellar. Before I finished it I looked more than a skeleton myself, emaciated by cancer and chemotherapy. I stand in the sunlight whenever the sun appears and let it bless me. Hundreds of people are praying for me. I pray too and hope. I believe I will see my children to adulthood and beyond. I believe I will finish this book.  
(p.6,7)

She begins with fear and addressing what it is in relation to death.

There is a final fear, quiet as a cat's feat, which sits in the heart of everyone. It has inevitability on its side. This is the fear, heavy as a tomb, that I sense when I enter the charnel house.

Before they moved some excavations in the Close unearthed another burial ground, more ancient than the Charnel House with the remains of several hundred Anglo Saxons. Archaeologists had got very excited about what they had found. It was decided to place these remains with those under the palace once the investigations were complete. Amongst them 81 were under 15. Denise wrote, knowing that she was to be their custodian:

I feel that I want to make a soft place for these particular bones. I want to place them in white cotton and silk, tread softly as I head for the exit, be gentle with the latch. I want to tell their long dead mothers they will be all right with me.

And so her task:

This book of bones, despite its frequent skulls, is really a book about life which is more than about dying....It consists in staying with the uncomfortable sight of bare bones until I fear neither them nor the message of mortality that they utter. It consists of looking at myself without the flesh on.

Her journey takes her from the Welsh Marches to Eastern Europe to four other similar and much studied sites. The first in Czerma in the Czech Republic houses large numbers of warriors from two sides in an ancient battle. She reflects on what it is to travel to unusual places:

It is not just that travelling to unfamiliar places, becoming for some brief time a sojourner and an innocent, may open one's mind to learning, though that is true. There is a stranger also at your gate. [The question the place asks is] are the broken parts of your deep self being healed? I sense that deep healing and embracing the stranger are linked.

At Seldec, also in the Czech republic, but this time a peaceful resting place, in that it was the charnel house of a Cistercian Abbey, the questions are different. The remains, beautifully arranged, not muddled as in the previous house, are not only of monastics but those from Mediaeval Europe who came to be buried there. Something in the soil meant that after three

days bodies would be reduced to skeletons, and with that came a popular belief this meant instant entry into heaven. The monastery became rich on this sub-Christian assurance:

For many the mechanics of the resurrection seem incredible. Yet I do not have this problem. Mine is this: my belief in the possibility of the resurrection does not remove the frustration of resurrection life seeming so far away. It is not so much the question of the how, as the question when..... Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism says that things will get better. Hope says that the good we envisage is the good we work towards. Optimism is largely passive, it is about waiting for what is better to come to you. Hope is active: it goes out and does. It falls and fails sometimes, but is tenacious and unafraid, and it survives after optimism is dashed.

Her conclusion, written days before she died, on Easter Day 2014 aged 51 helps us to see that waiting can be active, as hope is active, and it is the most essentially Godly thing we can do:

I want to tell these bones what they have given me, but they have no ears to hear and no eyes to see. So I will tell it whole to those who still have flesh on, speaking from my bones to theirs while there is breath to do so and life to live the words out. The beautiful brevity of this life throbs in me like an overgrown heartbeat. It sings in my bones, it lifts my ribs as I stretch high to draw the curtains closed against the night. Till dawn I write.