

Sermon given by the Company's Chaplain, Reverend G R Bush, at our annual service at St Mary-le-Bow, 11 July 2007

A sure sign of my gathering maturity is the frequency and volume of expostulations aimed at Radio 4 between the hours of 7 and 8.30. The impatience of my youth is now visited upon me in everything I think ludicrous and nonsensical. Of course it might seem that progress is set up like that and journalistic scriptwriters are tasked to raise the blood pressure. I am reliably informed that the Duke of Edinburgh does nothing but expostulate these days and that the Queen has found a way to ignore it!

I mention this so that you are forewarned of my likely lack of sympathy with some contemporary Health and Safety practice. We have long had a discreet 'No Smoking' sign under the tower – unsurprising as we can be a shortcut or a route to the restaurant in the crypt. But that is quite other than the new Government requirement that all churches, as public places, must have 'No Smoking' signs displayed at all entrances. This despite the fact that in 20 years of ministry I have only once seen someone light up – and that was the least offensive part of that person's conduct.

Some of such signage borders on the ludicrous – hence my warning about expostulation. A train in Spain which advises passengers, graphically, that, in the event of fire they should leave by the door! And a friend recounts a four-stage notice in Sheffield Station instructing people on the approved way to wash their hands – including detail on using soap and eventually drying them. And I note the recent launch of a Government campaign – financing full length posters on London buses, and enquiring whether there is too much salt in our food.

The irony of this paternalism is that we seem to be the objects of a benevolent administration at about the same time that we collectively have less influence in decision making processes; and equally in which individualism seems to have triumphed so proudly over all things communal and social. I encountered a gated community in a remotish sleepy Yorkshire village.

Of the social groups with fairly arbitrary membership the Church must be by far the largest – indeed it is one of the rare places in which people from a complex range of backgrounds (which I take to be one definition of society) meet and acquire some sense of mutual responsibility. But the Church has also historically been a place in which those with a common interest have formed and celebrated that purpose and have seen that together it

acquires a nobler and godlier purpose. That was especially true of churches in the City of London and notably here at St Mary-le-Bow.

Guilds, brotherhoods, sisterhoods and confraternities were voluntary and bound by both oath and levy with common purposes either through trade or another activity. Yet the history of the medieval trade guilds of London is incontrovertibly a history of prayer; a current in early modern society as ordinary as eating – and the highest form of prayer was of course the Mass. Much of the concept of prayer was bound up with the view that its multiplication could make God change his mind and undo the punishment which human action deserved. This was particularly true of the idea that prayer could release souls from an allotted space in purgatory. It is painfully crude for us to observe – although by no means extinct. What is notable is that guilds would often endow a chantry chapel with its own chaplain, which would to some extent lead to the triumph of lay rather than clerical interests – although this could be as unattractive as in the increase in flagellation following the Black Death or murderous attacks on Jews or as efficient and godly as the founding of hospitals.

Here at St Mary-le-Bow there were two fraternities; the most important being that of the Blessed Virgin Mary out of which the Drapers' Company emerged, the trade having existed around Bow Lane from at least the mid-13thC. The Company maintained two chaplains to say Mass for the souls of departed members. There was also the Fraternity of the Holy Trinity with its own chapel here which either fell into disuse or was dissolved quietly at the Reformation. Interestingly, both here and over the road at All Hallows' - now no longer and then in the gift of the Grocers - the Reformation took the most dramatic and radical of turns – images smashed and organs sold off - and it was here in this building that Mary Tudor began the short return to Roman obedience.

The pattern of guild history is religious as well as social and profoundly charitable – it acknowledged bonds - which we might express differently - between the living and the dead – and bonds between those of the same place and of the same trade. Although those early days were fraught with disease and political uncertainty there is much for us to reflect upon in closer and yet more generous relatedness in the society of that time. Nowadays we witness a paternalistic corrective and the impulse for social engineering which does not foster real loyalty and lasting communality. A modern guild or company such as yours surely bucks the trend of our age and makes a stand against both naked individualism, and purely personal profit; And an annual service is indeed the occasion to celebrate that with gusto and pleasure.