

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF THE HOLY AND
UNDIVIDED TRINITY OF NORWICH



“ST FURSEY: OUR FATHER IN THE FAITH”

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The Second Sunday of Epiphany

About the year 650 an Irish monk fell ill in a small remote village in Northern France. He had been on yet another of the missionary preaching tours that had featured so strongly during his lifetime. As he lay on his deathbed, visited by noble and poor alike, he still talked to them of Christ. When he died, the monks who were his travelling companions found the chief men of Picardy at the door to claim the body. Backed by their respective followers the situation was fraught for each wished to bury the body in their own city.

But the influence of the monk still spoke in death, and a compromise was found. The monk's body was placed on a farm cart, two oxen were yoked to it, and everyone stood back to see where they would go. They went to Peronne; and last October a group of pilgrims from Norfolk and beyond were allowed into the secretive rarely opened treasury of Amiens Cathedral to see this scene beautifully depicted on the side of a 14th-century silver chasse reliquary from a neighbouring village of the Somme. To our amazement the treasury curator then produced two of their special treasures – relics of the monk that we had not previously known existed. Our pilgrim group was drawn from a wide spectrum of Christian traditions, with differing views on relics, but the moment was special and the privilege great. Thirteen centuries fell away and that Irish monk spoke to us afresh. His name was Fursey, and today is his feast day.

Some of you will know of him, and others not, but he is special for all of us here. Fursey is the first Christian missionary to work in this part of East Anglia for whom we have a name. Indeed he was the first Irish religious leader to work anywhere in England. Although Norfolk often prides itself on “doing different”, it is still surprising that he is so little remembered in this area; but it is a sadness. No church in East Anglia is under his patronage, his day is still largely ignored, and no chapel in this Cathedral remembers him – although there is a splendid stained glass window in St Saviour's Chapel.

The Venerable Bede, writing about 75 years after Fursey's death gives several pages to Fursey who he obviously admired deeply. “He was renowned,” wrote Bede, “for his words and doings, and was outstanding in virtue”. “Inspired by the example of his goodness and the effectiveness of his teaching”, Bede went on, “many unbelievers were converted to Christ, and those who already believed were drawn to greater love and faith in Him”. Bede had written, he said, so that his readers would understand “how great a man Fursey was”. It is a view echoed by writers of our own day who place Fursey as the most influential Irish missionary in Europe after his predecessor Columbanus. Yet he still remains little known. It is why a group of Christians have come together as the “Fursey Pilgrims” to seek to understand more of the life and legacy of Fursey, and of the Celtic spirituality that formed and developed his faith. For both are relevant for today.

The bare bones of his life are straightforward. He was born in Ireland in the closing years of the 6th century. He early showed desire and aptitude to study the Bible and other religious literature, and a desire to grow in the faith was matched by a monastic discipline of life. In his early twenties he received visions that focussed his life on the urgency of preaching the

Good News of Christ. For the next decade he went the length and breadth of Ireland preaching; it was powerful and he was popular – the Billy Graham of his day, but his popularity increasingly disturbed him for he wished people to focus on Christ. Already a monk, he went with some fellow monks on retreat to a small Irish island to seek guidance. The desire to become “a pilgrim for the love of God” grew ever stronger, and the group left Ireland – never to return – for East Anglia. Here, Sigebert had just been recalled from exile as the new and Christian King of East Anglia, with a desire to share his faith with his new subjects. He welcomed Fursey and his companions warmly, and allowed them to settle at Cnobheresburgh, which has been traditionally regarded as the Roman fort at Burgh Castle near Great Yarmouth. At the same time he was welcoming Bishop Felix from the continent, allowing him to place his new see in Suffolk. It was a window of opportunity for Sigebert was only King for a few years. After nearly a decade here, Fursey made his brother Foillan Abbot while he went to share a year with his other brother Ultan in his hermitage somewhere in Norfolk. At the end of the year he felt called to continue his pilgrimage and went to France. Received by King Clovis II, and his leading official Earconwald, he founded a monastery at Lagny-sur-Marne, just east of Paris. Just down the road – such is the humour of God – can now be found Eurodisney!

Fursey’s journeys continued; many churches in Picardy are dedicated to him, many Holy Wells survive, his name is firmly on the maps. He was buried in a church built specially for him in Peronne, who have claimed him as their patron ever since. Four years later his still uncorrupt body was moved to a new shrine east of the altar. The Abbey founded nearby by his companions became a great centre for pilgrims and a well-known scriptorium. And in the Abbey, probably to mark the translation of his relics, one of the monks wrote the “Life of Fursey”. A contemporary biography by a brother monk who had known Fursey, prayed and worshipped with him, observed him, listened to him, probably journeyed with him. It is this “Life” from which Bede drew for his history, and it is this early “Life” that tells us so much about Fursey.

It feels so appropriate that St Fursey’s Day always falls in the Epiphany season. This time of the Church’s year in which our thoughts and Bible readings point to some of the special ways in which Jesus is manifested to the world. Ways in which Jesus is seen for who He really is – the Incarnate God. One way is through the lives, words and actions of His saints. In our Gospel John the Baptist recognises and points out Jesus, excitedly witnessing to Christ: “Look, here is the lamb of God!” Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, tells them how he is always thanking God for the grace given them in Jesus, that has enriched them “in speech and knowledge of every kind”. And in our Collect, recalling that in Christ “God makes all things new”, we prayed that the riches of God’s grace may transform the poverty of our nature so that God’s heavenly glory may be known in the renewal of our lives. We prayed that each of us may be an Epiphany of Christ through the lives we lead! As we recall the saints, we are reminded afresh of what grace can do in ordinary human lives that are surrendered to God.

The “Life of Fursey”, written so soon after his death, gives us a compelling picture of a holy humble man of God. It speaks of a strikingly handsome man who prayed much, a compassionate thoughtful person with whom it was easy to talk a man both patient and discreet, clear in thoughts and words, someone who could see deeply into a situation, a man who lived love. Speaking of his wisdom, his biographer quoted Paul: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Col 4:6). Above everything, he was a man with a burning lifelong desire to spread the Gospel of Christ. Fursey had taken to heart the invitation of Jesus to two of John’s disciples that we heard in our Gospel: “Come and see”. To spend time with Jesus is at the heart of the life of the Christian; it was at the heart of the life of Fursey – in prayer, in worship, and in times of retreat.

Throughout his life he never neglected the study of the scriptures, including the prophets. He would have seen the import of Isaiah’s “Servant” readings, one of which we heard earlier, that looked to the Christ who was to come and bring the whole world back to God. From early in his life he had sought to live the injunction “Let there be no discord in the Church of God”. Here, in East Anglia, Fursey and his fellow Celtic monks were working in the same area as Felix from the continent. Bede speaks of both men, and there is a strong implication that despite differing approaches there was no unpleasantness. Less than 30 years before the Synod of Whitby, sadly so often spoken of as a major confrontation between Celtic and Roman, here were representatives of both sides seemingly at one because of a common desire to proclaim Christ above all else.

Fursey shows us how to act in regard to fellow Christians, as much as he shows that the proclamation of the Good News should be at the heart of all we do. He recalls us also, as Celtic Christians saw so clearly, to the fact that life is to be lived as a pilgrim for God – a truth clearly expressed in the New Testament, but too often forgotten in the human longings for power and control that can hold back the life and development of the Christian Church.

I have left until last one of the key ingredients of Fursey’s life and faith. In his early 20s he received a number of visions, “out-of-body” experiences in which he met both angels and devils; times when, to his family and friends, it seemed he had died. Their influence upon him was great and he spoke of them so often, they take up about 80% of the written “Life”. Not only are they the earliest example of this type of Irish Christian literature, but are among the first major accounts of the journey of a soul in the other world to be composed in the early medieval period. Fursey has a pivotal role in the Western Church’s developing understanding of the world to come. From the remarkable intensity and details of his visions, let me take just three aspects.

Taken up, and accompanied throughout, by three angels, he has first a vision of the heavenly hosts. He hears their singing, he recognises words from Psalm 84, he is

overwhelmed by an intensity and brightness of light that surrounds and fills them. His reluctance to return to the body is understandable.

He is then given a vision of a dark valley with four fires burning in the air above it. These fires, say the angels, will engulf the world if left to burn. They are fires that remain to this day.

1. The fire of LIES AND FALSEHOOD
2. The fire of COVETOUSNESS
3. The fire of DISCORD
4. The fire of CRUELTY

Fursey is then witness to a discussion between the angel and Satan about penitence and forgiveness. Satan plucks scriptures out of context and uses them in a fundamental manner as if to admit no argument. He seeks to depict an angry and vengeful God, whose wrath comes upon us totally at the moment of death. But the angel replies: "You do not know the hidden judgements of God; so long as repentance is hoped for, divine mercy attends mankind". But Satan pursues his point that there is no place for repentance after death, to which the angel responds: "You do not know the depth of the mysteries of God: perchance there is". The argument goes on, but the point has been made – and probably for the first time – that penitence and forgiveness are possible after death; the idea of purgatory begins to take shape and that we here can share through praying for the departed and offering the Eucharist. The question is left with us, as to how we understand the death of Jesus on the cross, and can we even begin to imagine the true nature of the love of God.

Then, from among the angelic chorus and their joyous singing of Sanctus, there come two departed Irish bishops known from Fursey's youth, and we are given another insight into the Communion of Saints. They have words of wisdom for Fursey – but among them are highlighted the work of every missionary and priest:

1. Call the faithful to repentance
2. Build them up in faith
3. Make them strong through sharing in the Body and the Blood of the Eucharist

They give other words of advice: rejoice in creation, steward it faithfully; esteem nothing higher than love; remember that pride is the failure to learn humility; give alms to the poor, even when you are not asked; practice gentleness and patience; be joyful in hope of what the future will bring.

And their final word to Fursey: - "Go – announce the word of God to all". The injunction that focussed Fursey for the rest of this life on the urgency of preaching Christ.

The insights of faith granted to Fursey and spoken about often by him, were so crucial that his biographer wrote of them in detail, to the exclusion of much personal information we

would have like to know. But this only serves to reflect a man who gave his life to God's leading, and his very being to be filled with God's grace.

The prayer attributed to Fursey gathers up that sense of living in God's presence, in the communion of saints, with everything that he is and has given totally to the service of God:

The arms of God be around my shoulders,
The touch of the Holy Spirit upon my head,
The sign of Christ's cross upon my forehead,
The sound of the Holy Spirit in my ears,
The fragrance of the Holy Spirit in my nostrils,
The vision of heaven's company in my eyes,
The conversation of heaven's company on my lips,
The work of God's church in my hands,
The service of God and the neighbour in my feet,
A home for God in my heart,
And to God, the Father of all, my entire being.

I thank the Dean for the privilege of being in this pulpit this morning. I thank all of you for staying with me so stoically, as I have spoken of a saint who is becoming increasingly special for me; - Fursey, our father in the faith for all who live in this part of God's vineyard.

May I end with the words used by the unknown monk of Peronne to end his account of the life of Fursey, and offer them to you:

"To them that seek in faith, the merits of Fursey are bright with divine virtue; by the help of our Lord Jesu Christ, who with the Father and the Spirit lives and reigns unto the ages of ages. Amen."