



**Bishop Clive's Address at the Fursey Pilgrims Service.  
Held at St John (and St Felix) Felixstowe  
On the 1380th anniversary of Fursey's arrival in East Anglia.  
Saturday April 28<sup>th</sup> 2012 at 2.p.m.**

Recently, I was on a Thames barge, on a rainy bank holiday, off the east coast – just! More accurately, out of Maldon, in the Blackwater estuary: Northey and Osea, Ramsey, islands, old names, those. Through the mist, and rain dropped specs I could see the low marsh lands of the east, where (what do I know? No sailor I am!) only flat bottomed boats can approach and even then only at the high Spring tide. And so, picture the bishop of Dunwich standing (disguised) on the windswept deck, the bargeman struggling with the heavy canvas sails, and a small ‘epiphany of resurrection’ in Easter tide. The saints are there on the water, who accompany our pilgrimage today. Fursey from Ireland, (about whom I have learned so much more by being invited to be with you this afternoon – thank you) yes, from Ireland and then on to France; Felix from Kent, originally from Burgundy, and the third much on my mind, Botolph of Iken. (I have rashly volunteered to lead pilgrims ‘in the steps of St Botolph’ next month. The footprints of dinosaurs are more visible than those of Botolph.) What is it about these saintly apostles, these apostolic emissaries, these pioneer ministers, these bearers of the gospel? One thing they have in common, not much talked of in the modern literature, but vital and obvious to their getting around, when you think of it is their mode of transport: - the sea - open boats - the perils of voyage, uncertain navigation, the risks of shipwreck, grounding, and even landfall. Even getting off the boat on the shore at Dunwich had its risks.

So the text that came to life for me as I was standing on that windswept deck, was no, not the famous Battle of Maldon. But that other celebrated Anglo Saxon poem, The Seafarer. And before you get to thinking that there is something in the genes of apostolic succession which links the Bishop of Dunwich with Anglo Saxon poetry, no there isn't. I came across The poem the Seafarer in Gordon Mursell's magisterial two volumes on English Spirituality.

*“I sing my own true story, tell my travels,  
How I have often suffered times of hardship  
In days of toil, and have experienced  
Bitter anxiety, my troubled home  
On many a ship has been the heaving waves,  
Where grim night-watch has often been my lot  
At the ship's prow as it beat past the cliffs.”*

*Quoted in English Spirituality from Earliest Times to 1700 Gordon Mursell (2001) SPCK*

Well, before we feel slightly queasy let me reassure you we're in the stable solidity of this wonderful church which a more recent poet immortalised as *'the red brick twilight of St John's, where the white light burns with steady glow ... safe ... from the surging of the lonely sea...'* (from *Felixstowe or The Last of Her Order - John Betjeman's Collected Poems (1958) John Murray (Publishers) Ltd*)

These East Anglian saints are remote from our time, and yet we feel their presence, their 'geography' we inhabit, on the edge where the land meets the sea, and the boat rolls. We hear echoes of their names in the cry of gulls, their footfall on the beach, their comings and goings, their voyage through this world. And there's something special about remembering them 'on the Easter tide', as it were: when Jesus appears, and disappears. On this voyage the Lord goes before us, and yet the Lord is with us; the Lord approaches us over the waters, and says 'do not be afraid. It is I'. Or we spot him on the beach, where he asks us whether we love him. Or we are 'launched apostolically' from the top of the Mount of Ascension, to go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. We are all part of the resurrection community on the tide of Easter faith.

But what does Felix mean to us? 'The felicities of Felix', as it were? Here are four felicities of Felix. **The Gospel. Education. The Queen. The Sea.**

It was M.R. James, son of a Suffolk rectory, writer of ghost stories, and sometime Provost of Eton, whose imagination worked on the Felix story. Either hereabouts, in Felixstowe - for this afternoon, (I am content with Felixstowe!) or further up the coast: I go for both Felixstowe and Dunwich, for who knows! Where else to break the journey, when the wind drops, to take on supplies, shelter from the storms, or wait for the tide to lift you from the sandbanks. Coasting on the North Sea even today is hazardous: and all the time for Felix guarding **the precious gospel book**.

The first felicity of Felix. **The Gospel**. It's the picture of Felix leaping from the boat into the sea, the book of the Gospel held high above his head. The iconography (not oceanography) reproduced in Fr Andrew's little book shows Felix, sometime after the leap onto dry land, blessing, treasuring, drawing our attention to, the Gospel Book, the precious treasure of the good news.

Recently the St Cuthbert Gospel, late seventh century, preserved in its original red leather binding, was sold by the Jesuits, the British Library and Durham Cathedral raised £9million for it. M.R. James's story of the Red Book of Eye (red leather again): he writes of the rumours that it was seen in Henry VIIIth's time, by Leland, at the priory in Eye, then passed to the Corporation of Eye, and 'upon it oaths were taken' 'It is not now to be found', he writes. James inquired at Brome Hall near Eye, in the 1920s, checking out the story that it had indeed ended up there and been cut up for game labels a century before. 'I cherish the hope that remnants of the book may still exist in some deed box.' (M.R. James *Suffolk & Norfolk*, (1933) Dent 1933) Or as Fr Andrew says, in his lovely history of Felix, 'in a Suffolk attic'. Look when you get home.

We have Felix to thank for treasuring The Gospel for us in these parts. A manuscript was beyond price, imperilled on sea voyages: and we're blasé today about printed or electronic word. The imperishable gospel. But what a treasure The Gospel is. Not to be put in a glass case, or handled with white gloves in a library, but to be inhabited, lived in and lived out, and proclaimed, yes, but above all taken to heart, and treasured as the very words of life of the Word of Life. This is the gospel of the Lord, we say in our worship. As it is held aloft, think of Felix leaping from the boat, the gospel book lifted above the waves and spray, and thank God for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ among us. We live in him and he is us. The gospel of life.

The second felicity is **education**. The close links in those days between the arrival of the gospel on these shores, and education. Recall Bede's comment about King Sigebert, 'a good and religious man, who when he returned to his kingdom founded a school for the education of boys .... in this project he was assisted by Bishop Felix ... who provided him with teachers and masters from the school at Canterbury.' (I imagine a boat-load of teachers heading from the Kent Coast wondering where on earth they were going...) You can imagine Bede's personal interest in such an educational project linked to the faith, given the flourishing of Jarrow and his own education. You may have heard about the success of Open the Book? A project which, today, by public demand, takes Bible stories into schools, both church schools and county schools: teams of lay people using imaginative ways of story telling to tell the story – and yes, who love dressing up, and making props, whales and coats of many colours. By all accounts they are delighting teachers and pupils. You may be aware of the importance we are attaching to what we now call 'education for discipleship' in our churches, – church programmes for new believers, from Alpha to Emmaus, taking very seriously 'teaching the faith'. One of the most accessible books by Archbishop Rowan is Tokens of Trust, An Introduction to Christian Belief, (2007, Westminster John Knox) transcribed from talks he gave in Canterbury cathedral in 2005. It can be studied for instance in the Lent Courses of our East Anglian churches. The tradition of Christian education continues.

My third felicity of Felix is **the Queen**. It links with the Queen's Diamond Jubilee this year. Years ago I came across an article by Martin Warner, then at Walsingham, before he became Bishop of Whitby. In it he drew my attention to the links between these early apostles to East Anglia and the royal families, Sigbert, Anna, Edmund ... – the not altogether surprising fact that the gospel took root and spread where the royal family, the ruling elite, were, pardon the pun, 'on board.' Indeed, we could say this connection between rulers and the church is one of the themes of Bede's ecclesiastical history: the beginnings of establishment, the conjunction of royal power and stable faith. Professor Diarmaid McCulloch (the son of an East Anglian Rectory too) in his recent fascinating series For BBC, How God made the English, explored this thesis. And I don't think I am being sentimental in reflecting that as we celebrate the Queen's Jubilee this year we give thanks for the monarch being defender of the faith; to whom priests and bishops of the Church of England, upon entering office, swear allegiance. Some have commented how the Queen's Christmas broadcast has become more unself-consciously Christian. The Sovereign's own deep, personal, faith comes across in the Christmas message, which is yet inclusive of the whole nation. The security of the faith in this land in the time of these apostles was fragile, easily crushed as it was by the invasion of pagans all round our coasts, and in later years, fractured within itself in the reformation and civil wars. One of the felicities of Felix is that beneficent link between monarchy and the Christian faith, which at its best brings peace, and reminds us of another kingdom.

But 'I must go down to the sea again...' (Stevenson) return to where I started, and what triggered all these thoughts. As the wind caught the heavy canvas barge sails in the Blackwater estuary on a rainy Easter bank holiday. The fourth felicity is the **sea voyage**.

In the Seafarer, the Anglo Saxon poem, the poet describes the most frightful weather conditions so vividly, that it is as if they assault the soul as well as the body; and, as you read it, you know that it may have been inspired by a real sea voyage, but that it is about another voyage, through this world, to heaven. The voyage of life, as much as the voyage from Ireland or France, or Kent. The poet rises to his theme ..., yearning, looking forward, risking all for somewhere ... and I picture Felix, Fursey,

Botolph, Edmund, Julian, are with us, what a company in the pilgrimage of life, the voyage through this world, to heaven.

*'And yet the heart's desires  
Incite me now that I myself should go  
On towering seas, among the salt waves' play;  
And constantly the heartfelt wishes urge  
The spirit to venture, that I should go forth  
To see the lands of strangers far away.*

*Let us think where we have our real home,  
And then consider how we may come thither;  
And let us labour also, so that we  
May pass into eternal blessedness,  
Where life belongs amid the love of God,  
Hope in the heavens. The Holy One be thanked  
That He has raised us up, the Prince of Glory,  
Lord without end, to all eternity. Amen '*

Bishop Clive Young