

Fursey Pilgrimage October 2005 Burgh Castle Parish Church

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When Bede recorded Fursey's vision, he added a delightfully anecdotal note. 'An old brother of our monastery who is still living, testifies that he once knew a truthful and devout man who met Fursey in the province of the East Angles, and heard of these visions from his own mouth. He added that it was a frosty and bitter winter's day when Fursey told his story; and yet, though he wore only a thin garment, he was sweating profusely as though it had been summer...' (III 19 p 179)

Imagine Bede then in the late 720s or so in Jarrow chatting gently to an elderly monk whose memory stretched back say half a century to his younger days when he met an old man who in his youth had met a saint who told him a story he'd never forget because that unseasonal sweat. Those are the circumstances in which history is forged. The remembered moment, the vivid image on the inner eye. That detail, trapped like a fly in amber, inducts us into the strange, different world of early medieval Irish Christianity. Midsummer sweat in an East Anglian winter as the winds sweep across the North Sea from the Urals. Bede did not know whether Fursey's sweat was '...because of the consolation or the terror of his condition.'

We will never know, but what we can do is weigh an extraordinary story. Fursey was ill, and God granted him a vision, transporting him to the world of the angels, and from that perspective he was invited to look back at the world. Over a gloomy valley he saw four fires which he

was told were to consume the world - Falsehood, Covetousness, Discord and Cruelty. The fires of judgement take hold, rage, merge and Fursey is terrified, but his angelic guide divides the flames and Fursey passes through unharmed. Or nearly. A spiteful devil grabs one of the burning damned and thrusts him against Fursey so that his shoulder and jaw are burned. 'Don't reject your friends', snarls the devil. And Bede tells us that Fursey had accepted a death bed offering of clothing from this man and therefore shares his punishment. The angel guide then explains to Fursey the etiquette of death-bed ministry, and the story ends. No wonder poor old Fursey had a midsummer sweat in mid-winter.

All that was of considerable interest to Bede's readers, a reminder at once that the past is both a foreign country and a familiar landscape. On the one hand we can rationalise away the relationship between sickness and vision, and lay to one side the taint of sin that erodes purity. On the other, we recognise only too clearly the consuming fires, and we in our generation know more than most about the ways in which sin weaves its subtle way into the very structures by which we construct our economic and social processes. There is a distance about Fursey's Christian world, yet also a welcome closeness.

Let me begin with the closeness. Caught up in his angelic perspective, Fursey sees the four fires consuming the earth. The first is falsehood, which is fuelled by a Christian inability to believe the promises of God and a propensity to live with at least one and half feet in the priorities of the kingdom of the G8. The second, covetousness, defined neatly as putting worldly wealth before the love of God. The third, caught with sharp moral vision as offending

neighbours, on the micro as well as the macro level. And finally Cruelty, 'when we think it no crime to rob and defraud the weak.' And so the 7th century church speaks to the 21st century of the nature of discipleship, and the 21st century church recognises the authenticity of Christ. This is a picture of ministry as we know it. We understand falsehood. We know the script. In Fursey's early medieval world there was a stark contrast between belief and unbelief. We have not yet arrived in Christendom. The old gods have their power, albeit one severely limited by the authority of Christian kings like Sigebert. Who says the reformation invented 'cuius regio, eius religio?', roughly translated, 'As the king believes, so will the people practice.' Baptism was indeed about putting on a new life in Christ. Here was change, transformation and Christian difference. And that difference could save the world from the flames of falsehood, for it could reveal the beating heart of the universe, the love of God embracing hearth and fire, rain and sun, castle and community. In the light of the gospel the world is able to be its created, journeying self, the spinning theatre of God's glory.

Such an old-fashioned word, covetousness. It has almost vanished from our vocabulary. Like most good moral theologians before and since, Fursey defines it as putting worldly wealth before the love of God. In the great temples of Bluewater, Lakeside and Meadowhall, we have quietly turned covetousness from a sin into a necessity, for consumerism has become one of the drivers of economic stability. The preacher needs to tread carefully here, for hypocrisy is but a glamorous phrase away. My Puritan ancestors of the seventeenth century, like that great popular theologian and doctor of souls Richard Baxter can help us here. They knew exactly what Fursey was talking

about. It was idolatry. It was de-throning God. And they abhorred it for two reasons. First, it was an act of violence against creation, for all the works of creation are mirrors of God's love and goodness, and they are to be honoured and respected as such. So, for example, there is nothing wrong with a passion for music, for music reflects something of God's beauty. But there is something wrong with a passion for music if it so consumes you that you forget that it is one of the loveliest of God's creatures. What matters is a sense of proportion. Second, it was an act of violence against the soul. As Baxter protested, 'It is a perverting of the very drift of a man's life, as employed in seeking a wrong end, and not only of some one faculty or act: it is an habitual sin of the state and course of mind and life, and not only a particular actual sin.' In other words, it stops you being who you are, and who you were made to be - a child of God. Our world bears ample evidence of the way we have treated it disproportionately as we have been 'employed in seeking wrong ends.' Rising sea levels, melting ice caps, decimated rain forests, disappearing species. Fursey's fire threatens still.

We do not need to reflect long on the moral realism of offending neighbours. It is the very stuff of civil law and international relations. From the feud over the overmighty leylandia to the feud over the rights to territory and power, this too is our world. It always has been. It is the human condition. So too is Cruelty. We too know about the robbery and abuse of the poor, because we've institutionalised it into trade rules which allow the rich north to prosper at the expense of the poor south. But such cruelty has always been with us. Like many others, I'm reading Simon Schama's Rough Crossings at the moment. It is a brilliantly shocking analysis of slavery. He relates how in 1781 a

slave ship, the Zong, was en route from Africa to Jamaica. It was a terrible journey, disease and sickness compounded with navigational error. So much so that the water supply was under threat. The captain of the slaver decided that the way to handle the problem was to reduce his cargo load, and so over the course of three days, 132 slaves were slung into shark infested water. No one would have known but for the fact that nearly two years later, the slaves' owners claimed £3960 (£30 per slave) from the ship's insurers who decided to take the case to law. Was this a cargo, in which case the insurers were indeed liable, or were they people, whom it was unlawful to kill, in which case they were not? Thus began a case, which inspired a prize essay title in the University of Cambridge, won by a student from Wisbech called Thomas Clarkson who with William Wilberforce brought about the abolition of the slave trade. It is not so long ago then, that your Christian ancestors and mine turned not a hair at the thought that a black human being was a bit of cargo that could be jettisoned to the ever-circling sharks. We know only too well about robbing and defrauding the weak. Fursey's world, Thomas Clarkson's world, our world. There is a closeness about Fursey's world.

But in other ways our Christian world is profoundly different. We stand at the other end of Christendom from Fursey, and we yearn for his clarity of vision. We are caught in a long tail of institutional church decline which began in the mid 19th century and looks set fair for a good number of years yet. We need to understand for the first time how to be missionaries, how to live the things of God in a society permeated with the intellectual and architectural detritus of a Christian civilisation, yet which has lost the key that unlocks it. 'A

teenager was fascinated by the magic square on Gaudi's Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona in which many numerical combinations add up to 33. Why 33 she asked? Because Jesus died at that age. That was young - what did he die of? Walking into the cathedral she continued, 'Who's that woman, and why does she always have a baby?'

Maybe in Fursey we can see a signal authenticity of life, an ability to live with at least one and a half feet in God's kingdom rather than the 68 kingdoms. Maybe that is what missionaries have to do. Fursey knew that to be a Christian was to be different, to stand out, to live to an alternative heartbeat. We need to learn how to be different. He can teach us that across the gulf of Christendom. For make no mistake, the Celtic saints were different. We romanticise them as gentle souls, at one with the natural world, and we miss the rigour of their spiritual discipline, praying the psalms up their chests in icy seas, blown in their coracles wherever the Spirit wished, living a monastic routine that makes the Rule of Benedict look like life in the Gleneagles Hotel.

Here was a man who lived the difference that opened up a different kingdom where falsehood, covetousness, offence and cruelty were held at bay. Here was a man who lived the peace of Christ Jesus, in whom neighbours are united, human being cherished, the earth honoured and the self kept in due and holy proportion. The rigours of Celtic asceticism are beyond most of us, and probably not even fitting for an age such as ours. Yet the fruits of Fursey's discipleship - an openness to be blown by the Spirit of God even to the edge of Anglia and beyond, a willingness to work in partnership with both the state, in the person of Sigbert, and other Christians in the form of Felix - are surely gifts for which we must yearn and pray. But above all we should

yearn for that midsummer sweat in mid-winter, that sign of difference, that closeness to God which marked him out which left such a powerful impression on that monk of Jarrow who confided in Bede. Fursey the pilgrim journeyed on from this place, a saint in search of difference making and kingdom building. And so must we, to be those who make a difference, who open up God's possibilities. Let me finish with a story from Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners Community in the States. He tells of a very ordinary inner city church whose elderly members were both saddened and frightened by the growth of drug trafficking on their streets. None of them were powerful movers and shakers, but they decided that they ought to do something. So, after a good deal of planning and prayer they went into action. They collected together ten video cameras, sat an elderly lady down on each corner with a camera, and waited. There were no films in the cameras, but the drug traffickers didn't know that, and they melted into the far distance for fear of the law. God, said Jim Wallis, reclaiming his turf. For this is his world, for our delight. Fursey, I think, might have smiled at that, and might tell us to go and be imaginative, for God's sake.

Amen.