

## Servers Guild 14th- June, 2005

Someone helpfully(?) suggested "There is no *necessity* to preach for the Servers' Guild." "Quite," I replied, "but I don't want anyone to think that I couldn't be bothered, nor - even worse - that I had nothing to say." Neither of these two reasons, of course, amount to the right reason, which is the glory of God. It was said of Canon Wood of St. Clement's Cambridge (whose ministry there lasted from the 1860s to the 1920s!) that he would preach at weekday evensong even if no one else were present, because it was for the glory of God.

This period in the Church's Year, however, does not suggest any obvious subject for our contemplation because the great saving events of Holy Week to Pentecost are past. If Trinitytide has a theme at all it is one of responsibility for becoming members of Christ in our baptism (as anciently administered either at Pascha or Pentecost). There is a one other point of focus: the most important saints' days are reserved for this long season. We are now encouraged to think of seeing our risen Lord through the eyes of, and within the experience of, his most exemplary servants. Today *was* St. Basil's day - in the past tense - as a saint's day closes at even. That is one reason why, here, we cannot have the mass in the evening, for every evening brings a new liturgical day.

So, is there a saint for this new liturgical day, or have we run out of them? In the technical sense, yes, but in the deep sense of a faithful, and fruitful, member of Christ we have one rather special commemoration. We hear quite a lot about women in the Church *now*, but so little about women in the Church in earlier times. Among earlier Anglican women there were some most remarkable souls and minds. Yet, perhaps, the most distinguished were the C.19 Christina Rossetti (whose 'Bleak Mid Winter' gets an airing every Christmass-time) and the C.20 Evelyn Underhill, and today is her obit.

Evelyn came from a privileged family, her father was a barrister. She went to London University, a rare distinction for a woman born in 1875. Although opportunities were then limited, surely a brilliant future beckoned, yet, in 1907, having experienced some serious Christian conversion, she dedicated the rest of her life to the study of theology. Moreover, instead of turning to popular revivalist preachers of the day or becoming fixated with noisy movements, she tried to make sense of her religious experience by turning to the classic, but then generally neglected texts on prayer and contemplation. A wise choice, yet also a difficult and lonely one. It was, however, a choice that not only benefited Evelyn personally, but the entire Anglican tradition. Having begun this study she could not put it down, and so she produced many major works. Her concern was not only for silent prayer, visions or experiences, but also liturgical prayer. She wrote about Christian worship quoting passages from the ancient liturgies extensively. Her study was historically based and historically informed, but she was primarily concerned with the practicalities and proper disposition of everyday worshippers. Although some of her books are quite specialised, she produced many short, simply written volumes that might help anyone who could spare the time for a little reading. If you see one of these today, reasonably priced, grab it.

One such is *The Mystery of Sacrifice* which demonstrates the significance of, not only the historic rites, but, the historic realities that they enshrine and into which God draws us:

*"The appeal to history is of the very stuff of Christian worship, which cannot express itself in abstract terms alone. Therefore we here present before God the memorial of the greatest moment of our history: when in and for the human race Christ made the perfect response of love, and carried humanity in His Person up into Eternal Life. Here the Liturgy displays to the soul the austere attractions of a total self-abandonment; the Cross, and the reward of the Cross. [...] And now the Church, concelebrating with her Master, and again and again setting forth within the visible order the unseen mystery of His eternal sacrifice, adds solemn commemorative action to solemn commemorative words. As He 'the day before He suffered took bread into His holy and venerable hands.'" [So now, the obedient Church correspondingly enshrines and extends this offering] "praying that these gifts, now consecrated and become 'the Bread of Eternal Life and the Chalice of everlasting Salvation,' may be presented in their reality at 'Thine altar on high, in the presence of Thy Divine Majesty.'" And last, the triune action is completed by the invocation of the Holy Spirit, that He may come in the splendour of His life-giving power, and 'rest upon, bless and hallow' the Offerings and offerers, and unify in God Eternity and Time." (pp.47-8)*

That rendering is from our own English Missal. Underhill, however, following Anglican use in Scotland and elsewhere, borrows expressions from Eastern sources to complete her picture of God's transforming action. Be we priests, servers, or even those without the sanctuary, we are all entrusted with this sacred gift and the faith it embodies. It is a challenge for me, as a traditionalist priest, to encourage you all in these uncertain times. None of us should relax, but search, and test the spirits; has the Church been edified? If not why? What better way to find out, than through the records of the saints - both official and unofficial? What did St. Basil think, how might Evelyn have responded and what did we learn from all those faithful servants who have guided us to Christ?