

BETWEEN TWO FUNERALS
Holy Trinity 1491-1616

“RIVALRY”

This sermon is the first in a series of five sermons exploring themes arising from the Vicar’s sabbatical study project of 2006. He was able to study the history of Holy Trinity between the two great funerals of the Dean, Thomas Balsall, in 1491 and the poet, William Shakespeare, in 1616, with a special focus on the worship, spirituality, and daily church life of clergy and parishioners at Holy Trinity during those turbulent years.

10 September	“Rivalry”
24 September	“Let Sense be Dumb”
8 October	“The Name of Jesus”
19 November	“Under the Thumb”
10 December	“Who’s Sitting in my Chair?”

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Last week someone came to me to say what fun they'd been having. They're part of a group of people from this church who begin work this week leading assemblies in local schools. They'll be called 'The Jesus People...from Holy Trinity' and they'd been working out how they can best present bible stories in a way children will really enjoy and relate to. They had clearly been tapping into the child that lies within us all, tapping into the playfulness, creativity, openness and trust that is deep down there in all of us adults, and having a lot of fun in the process.

That playful, open child within is crucial to our well being, as Jesus himself said, 'Unless you receive the Kingdom of God like a child you shall never enter it.' Sadly I know that as I grow older its often another 'inner child' that comes to the fore; the one who didn't always get what they wanted, that felt pushed out, envious or resentful of siblings who seemed to be loved more. That child is within us all too, the one that, if let out, still likes to stamp its foot and make a fuss.

Well, I've just got back from three months sabbatical leave, and what a privilege and joy that has been for me. My aim for that time was to become lighter in body, mind and spirit. A light hearted aim, but one echoing that Benedictine way of life, with each day involving work and exercise for Body, Mind and Spirit. Time to work out at the Gym, really good time to pray and walk with God; and time to study something in depth. I focussed on the history of this church just before and during the Reformation, from Balsall's funeral in 1491 at the highpoint of medieval Catholicism, to Shakespeare's in 1616, when the church had changed entirely. Buried within two feet of each other their church and world were poles apart. In this series of five autumn sermons I want to bring out five themes from that time, which I feel are still relevant to us today, both in our personal lives and as a community of faith.

Today's theme and sermon title is "**Rivalry**", because rivalry and envy seemed sadly to be written into the very fabric of this church and town during that pivotal period of its development, and of course it can still be around today.

Saxon monks built the first church here in 714 to live the Benedictine way of Work, Worship and Study. We worship in a church dating from around 1210, with the side aisles being added in the 1300's and the chancel and high roof in the nave coming in the late 1400's.

During the middle ages the church here had many altars. What we now call the North aisle or Clopton chapel side had altars dedicated to the Holy Cross, St John Apostle and St John Baptist, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, where the five Guild priests celebrated masses each day.

In 1331 the Chantry chapel of St Thomas Becket was established by John de Stratford on the south side of the church and a College of Priests formed ‘for the increase of divine service’, and to say daily masses for the dead. By now there were at least ten clergy each saying masses and services in this church every day, and sadly disputes and wrangling began almost immediately! We were in Worcester diocese in those days and the Bishop had to give the Guild priests instructions to keep the peace, ordering them to join with the College clergy four times a year for services in the chancel, and pay annual dues to show the Collegiate Church ranked above the Guild.

Matters got even worse when the Guild Chapel as we know it began to be built in the 1420’s and the Guild priests were given the right to say mass there, instead of in Holy Trinity. Now there was a rival church in Stratford for the first time, and closer to the centre too. The Guild priests were quick to grasp an opportunity and timed their Sunday masses to start a little earlier than the ones down here, which soon proved popular. Litigation flowed back and forth between the Dean and Collegiate clergy of the parish church and the rival clergy of the Guild as they bickered and struggled for supremacy.

In 1432 the Pope himself was forced to intervene, and Stratford received its one and only personal Papal Bull. The Pope ordered:

“that the Chaplains of the guild were not to begin masses in their chapel before the gospel at the High Mass had been read in the Collegiate church”, (which in those days means the service had ended), “unless” the Pope goes on “it be unduly postponed *by malice* in order to prevent the divine offices in their Oratory.” Showing just what a low ebb relations had reached!

Secondly, “They are not to stir up strife, but to make concord between the warden and his people” and

“They are not to entice the parishioners from their church, but to sustain its honour”.

Obviously the churchwardens had been getting some stick as well because the Pope ordered the Guild clergy to,

“salute them with due reverence, and to behave to them fittingly and honestly.”

And so it goes on.

Rivalry and competition is writ large in the history of the churches here. Thankfully the papal bull helped, and by the time of Dean Thomas Balsall relations were obviously much much better. He was not only Dean and Rector here from, but made sure he was also a member of the Guild of the Holy Cross as well, taking part in all their feasts, jointly appointing schoolmasters and contributing generously to the building of the chancel at the Guild Chapel that we still use today.

Balsall showed that it was possible to move from a Win-Lose mentality to a Win-Win mentality in Christian ministry. He saw that a strong and happy Guild Chapel with its clergy working co-operatively with the parish church was good for the town, and for the gospel. The gospel of Jesus, who never drew praise to himself, but always gave glory to God the Father.

Today we don't have ten full time priests in the church, but it's just as easy for clergy to be prey to envy and insecurity. It's in the history here and we feed it whenever we build one up against another. But its not just clergy who are affected. How do we feel in the family when a sibling gets more favours, or at work when someone younger is promoted above us? Or in church when someone is chosen to lead something instead of us? However mature we are as people its hard not to still feel 'Ouch' when someone surpasses us or is preferred to us and to lash out in some way as that resentful child within feels hurt. Do we undermine or grumble or can we think Win-Win and ask God to show us what we can best do now?

And in our world there are rivalrous conflicts that seem never ending, be it Israeli and Arab, or in some people's minds Muslim and Christian. With the anniversary of 9-11 upon us, war in Iraq and Afghanistan and repeated terrorist threats it's easy to lose hope of moving on to something better. Whether at home, at work, at church or in international affairs; rivalry and envy, the dynamic of 'For me to win - you must lose' is a powerful one.

500 years ago the Pope and Thomas Balsall showed Stratford another way, where 'For me to really win, you must win too.'

We can't do much to affect international relations and conflicts, but we can start with ourselves and where we are now. As you sit, picture where you feel envy or rivalry in your life right now.... now try and see that with God's eyes...what is he saying to you...now?

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