

Dear Friends,

'Getting Personal'

Towards the end of October this year, contractors working on the east wall of the nave at All Saints church found fragments of manuscript, hand-written in Latin, which had become buried amongst loose mortar between some stones. Photographs of the fragments have been examined by Jeremy Ashbee at English Heritage and a medieval specialist, Michael Carter, who have identified them as being part of a 15th Century service book.

How they came to be there will never be known for certain, but we do know that there was once a chimney and fireplace in that part of the building, and judging from the scorch marks on the manuscript, a very likely explanation is that the pages of the prayer book were being used to light a fire, when some wafted up the chimney and became stuck in a crevice. If this is what happened, it is a wonderful illustration of how fickle our values can be. The person who wanted to light the fire probably looked upon the prayer book as a worthless piece of rubbish, a relic from the church's pre-Reformation past, full of incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo. We today, by contrast, see it as a precious historical treasure to be preserved and perhaps even displayed. It is certainly not, from our perspective, a worthless piece of rubbish.

Our differing attitudes towards these fragments of manuscript show how the value we place on things can in part be relative to the situation in which we find ourselves. If the person lighting the fire had become so cold, for example, that their health or survival depended upon their staying warm, we can readily understand why preserving pages of a prayer book was less important to them than preserving their life. But talk of relativity can only take us so far. When we say that values are 'relative', they must be relative *to* something – and for Christians that constant something is the eternal, unchanging Mind of God.

God has shown us in his Son, Jesus, for example, the baby born in a manger, that every human being is precious to him, regardless of their situation – their wealth, status or social background. As the angel said to the shepherds,

“I bring you good news that will cause great joy for *all the people*.” (Luke 2:10)

The Christian gospel is deeply personal; it affirms the dignity of every single person. At a recent conference the Pope declared that the most important contribution which we Christians can make to the current debate on the future of Europe is to affirm the importance of people, and to resist those *depersonalising* tendencies of bureaucracy which we increasingly encounter, where “there are no citizens, only votes. There are no migrants, only quotas. There are no workers, only economic markers. There are no poor, only thresholds of poverty. Europe, he said, “is not a mass of statistics and institutions, but is made up of people”, individuals who are loved by God and called by him to be his children (Jn.1:12-13).

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