



## **Sermons: On Some Items in the Wren A Fragment of the Virgin's Veil (?)**

30 October 2022

John Summers

*1 Samuel 3: 1–10    Matthew 13: 44–46*

They say you should never meet your heroes. Can I offer another, not unrelated piece of advice? If you are ever commissioned to give a sermon on a fantastical relic which legend (but so far only legend) says is possibly hidden among the treasures of the Wren, don't go all Indiana Jones and start looking for it. Because if you do start looking for it, you might find it, and it might turn out to be not as obviously exciting as you had hoped.

In your order of service you will find printed part of a handwritten index of peculiar items in the Wren library. Between Newton's tobacco stopper and a bust of Tennyson – both impressive enough you might think – there is a reference to a 'Piece of the Virgin Mary's Veil', followed by an all important question mark and then the name of the donor, Mr Potts. Could it really be that such an enormously significant historical and religious item had found its way over the millennia into the hallowed cases of the Wren?

The kind and endlessly generous Dr Bell and I began a hunt. We descended to one of the Wren's cabinet of curiosities. After a while, there among the medieval gold rings, a poet's finger bones, Henry VIII's comb and 'an excrescency upon the head of a deer', we found it. Not Mary's veil after all, but a souvenir of the Holy House of Loreto, which seemed to have been catalogued as if it were part of a garment belonging to our Lady.

You will recall that the Holy House of Loreto is a shrine in Italy containing what is reputed to be the Holy's family's house, the house having flown from the Holy Land to Croatia, supported by angels, in 1291. After various stops at locations along the way, the House came to rest in Loreto in 1296. I am deeply conscious that many in Trinity College, this temple of reason, will treat this story with great scepticism: why, the doubters will ask, would the angels have chosen to fly to Loreto rather than some more agreeable Italian resort; but the Lord moves in mysterious ways.

Over the centuries, pilgrims have visited the shrine and its statute of the Madonna and have gone away with various souvenirs. One such memento is what found its way to the Wren and what set the hare running that the Virgin's veil might be among us. The souvenir, dated 1820, is part of a normal veil, stuck onto a certificate, which confirms that the normal piece of veil had been within touching distance of the Madonna at Loreto (and not just the modern Madonna, commissioned in the 1920s, but the medieval statute dating from the 1400s, destroyed in a fire in the early twentieth century). You can see a picture of the

certificate in your order of service, and you can see it for real in the Ante-Chapel after the service, along with some of the other curiosities I have mentioned.

Does it make the Wren a more or less interesting place to know, as we now do, that it does not contain a fragment of Mary's veil? The saga invites us to think about why we regard places as interesting or significant.

Humans are placed people, in the sense that we are bound to experience life through the mediation of places (including the things which they contain). We navigate places not just as physical phenomena, but also as the sources of the traditions and stories which develop in and around them. Yet despite our attachment to places, we all yearn, at various times, for something which is beyond place and beyond the physical. We want to break free from the particularities of our situation and embrace something eternal, absolute and unsullied by contingency. This is not something which we will ever be able to achieve: we must always exist in places, at least in this life. But what we can hope to achieve, if we are disciplined enough, is a glimpse of the divine, transcending places and things and the other mundane features of the everyday.

The tension between the particular place and the abstract eternal is seen in the cross: situated firmly on the earthly, horizontal plane, it nevertheless continuously points vertically to heaven and all that is promised therein. It articulates how the two provinces, earthly and heavenly, particular and abstract, created and divine, can and do approach each other and interact. Indeed the cross discloses how these two provinces come to fullness at the point at which they intersect, something seen also in the body of Christ, man and God at once in symbiotic but distinct abundance. God, in Christ, is present on earth but different from it.

The trouble is that human beings are lazy and always incline back to whatever is easiest. For us, that means prioritising the experience of places and things in all their accessible concreteness, rather than investing in the difficult project of taking the transcendent seriously for what it is: observable but not contained in the physical.

When we come across places and things which speak to us of the divine, our instinct is to try to contain them in the physical – an endeavour as futile as trying to catch sunlight in your hands. Scripture is full of accounts of mankind trying to trap God on earth like some kind of butterfly, and of God's refusal to be so bound. We might recall the disciples' misguided desire to build a house for Jesus and the prophets at the Transfiguration, to contain them like some comfortable museum piece for future examination and enjoyment. Perhaps the Easter tomb is the example *par excellence* of the futility of human attempts to contain what is transcendent in the particular.

By contrast, rich appreciation of both earth and heaven comes when we acknowledge the fleeting experience of heaven in ordinary as real, uncapturable but fundamentally important. It comes when we accept heaven in ordinary as the most crucial part of life, even if, perhaps *because*, we cannot capture it. Samuel is closest to God when he is alive to him not as someone calling from a particular place but as placeless presence woven into the darkness: "Speak, for thy servant heareth". It is a remarkable feature of the story we heard earlier on that it takes a blind man, Eli, to open Samuel's eyes to the depth of experience available to him if he is willing to let go of the constraints of the physical.

A crucial detail of the parable of the hidden treasure is that the man who finds the treasure *hides it again*: he buys the field knowing that great value is within it but he feels no need to possess the gold and jewels in their particularity: the field is treasure to him because he is aware of something precious which is present there but unseen. What is so much soil to others is richness to him because he knows what is alive inside it.

I've drifted a long way from the Virgin's veil. You've probably drifted off to sleep. But perhaps I can bring the various strands together like this. The 'is it/isn't it' question which surrounded Mary's veil and its possible presence in the Wren *was* exciting. Who wouldn't be excited by encountering a physical link to some of the most momentous events in history? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a connection to that history, those people, those stories and all that was revealed in the incarnation, in a fragment of the veil, and in the Wren of all places?

But our excitement risks becoming idolatrous if it obsesses about the physical item itself. We must direct our wonder not at the threads but at what they point to beyond place and thing – to the spectacle of God active in creation, glimpsed in the particular, amidst the grot and confusion of the mundane. Looked at this way, the excitement generated by the is it/isn't it question and the Virgin's Veil bears wholesome fruit because it dares us to look again at *any* place or thing which we might encounter and to ask what in them might be pointing to something beyond themselves and beyond us. Our vocation is to be alive to the presence of the divine not only in holy lace but in muddy fields and the pitch black of the night.

In this sense, everything in creation is veiled. We don't need the Virgin's Veil, exciting as it would be, to stare in wonder at snatches of eternity breaking in around us. But we do need patience, and the legend of the Veil might inspire us to be patient.

RS Thomas said of prayer that we should wear out our eyes, not our knees. Amen.