

Easter 5 – 22nd May 2011

Margery Kempe: Finding a voice

The first reading today described the activity of God, and of Noah as the great flood subsided until on the second month, on the 27th day of the month, the earth was dry. And at long last, just as at the beginning, God speaks. 'Go'....he says to Noah.

If there is a title to today's sermon it is finding a voice, for this aspect of humanity links us profoundly with the God who, from the beginning has spoken and in speaking has created and sustained the world

The second reading tells the story of Stephen, a follower of Jesus chosen to be a Deacon in the earliest Christian community and finding that, instead of activity, he is called to speech. Standing before the ranks of the religious authorities he told of what he saw: heaven opened and the Son of Man at God's right hand. To Jewish ears, blasphemy, and the sentence was carried out immediately.

And in the front of your service books is part of the account of Margery Kempe's visit to Leicester, during which she was imprisoned and put on trial for heresy. 30 years before Wycliffe had been the parish priest just down the road at Lutterworth and his followers continued to be influential in the area, so the authorities were jittery. We'll hear more about that next Sunday afternoon from Rob Gladstone.

Margery lived at a time of anxiety, and new opportunity. She was born In King's (then Bishop's) Lynn during the final years of the reign of the great king Edward 3, who's heir, Richard 2, was a child. In the half century before her birth plague had killed a third of the population of the country. We have some idea of the social and economic upheaval which resulted In Leicestershire from the deserted villages around us. Villages had ceased to be viable, and their inhabitants moved to the towns. Relationships of dependence and

deference collapsed and new social movements emerged.

Early in Margery's life there was the widespread summer of insurrection we now call the peasant's revolt. Those in authority were jittery. They tried, as we hear in Margery's account, through the law and the church, to impose order in the old ways. They failed because those who survived the plague found themselves with greater economic clout and power. A new middling sort of people emerged who traded and travelled and debated and took authority for themselves. Women seized the opportunity to explore the world around them. New civic institutions emerged, some of them founded and funded by women. Here in Leicester the Guilds expanded, with men and women members, the Guildhall was built Guildhall was built and St Martin's was expanded. The magistracy grew in significance: there is a grand exhibition about its history in the Guildhall at the moment. And the new Universities of Cambridge and Oxford developed in size and significance.

Not that Margery was formally educated. Her book tells us that she could neither read nor write, and began by dictating her story to her son. The result was an illegible text, and only after great effort did she manage to get it re-written by a priest. Perhaps the priest acted as a holy ghost writer, organizing and editing the texts to suit himself, but there is something so direct and straightforward about the writing that it conveys an authenticity, as if we are hearing the voice of a Mediaeval Englishwoman of unforgettable courage and unparalleled experience.

Margery ran a brewery, and the business failed. She married a Norfolk man, and bore 14 children. They took vows of chastity, and travelled on pilgrimage to Canterbury. Then Margery travelled with others to the Holy Land and Italy and then to Compostella (she was on her way home when she came through Leicester) and at the age of 60 to Norway and Danzig. She met, and debated with, Bishops Repyngdon of Lincoln, Peveral of Worcester, Bowet of York and Arundel and Chichele of Canterbury. But the point of her story she insisted was to tell of her life's journey towards God.

Philip in today's gospel says 'show us the father, and we shall be satisfied'.

Margery rarely seems to have lost the sense of the presence of God in Christ which became particularly vivid after a breakdown she experienced after the birth of her first child. Her interpretations of her agonies and ecstasies must be put down, at least partly, to the emphases put into her mind by others — not least by friendly priests who read useful contemporary spiritual writings to her, and explained significant ideas. But her accounts of ‘holy dalliance’ with Christ are straightforwardly earthy, her accounts of imagining being present at the births of both the Virgin and Christ delightfully domestic, and her accounts of her visions of heaven, and her frequent sobbing and weeping, the ‘gift of tears’ as she puts it, seem to be unique to her.

The liturgy was central to her story providing it with a framework. She places her “conversion” in Advent, and interweaves it with reflections on the infancy of Christ. Her meditation on the Passion is shaped by her experiences of the worship of Holy Week. Her trial in Leicester shows how she could articulate what the Mass meant to her theologically as well as spiritually. She talked of spiritual progress in terms of her pilgrimages within England, and to Jerusalem and Rome. There she had the greatest of her experiences, including that of a mystical marriage with God, which she believed had taken place in Rome.

Telling your story leaves you vulnerable. As Stephen discovered, finding a voice, giving witness to your experience of Christ, puts you at great risk. For Stephen the result was trial and execution. For Margery there was also trial by her contemporaries, though thankfully not execution. There was also trial by posterity.

Margery’s book was lost for centuries, and only rediscovered in 1934. Since then historians and theologians have been fascinated by this woman and her story. And they have become increasingly critical of her. There have been those in who accused her of wanting to be a saint, of writing her story in the pattern of other holy women, especially Bridget of Sweden, who clearly was one of Margery’s role models. She is accused of producing not autobiography but auto-hagiography. I think that accusation of self-aggrandizement is

overstated. Margery is constantly concerned to find wise guides to whom she can be accountable and she names those who are her soul friends, including a Dominican anchorite in Lynn, the saintly Richard of Caister at Norwich, the Carmelites Alan of Lynn and William Southfield and her confessor Robert Spryngolde. Most movingly she includes conversations with Dame Julian of Norwich, who assures her that her experiences are genuinely of God.

She also emerges as a strong, uppity and independent woman unafraid to speak truth to power. She tells the Archbishop of Canterbury off in public because his servants swear. She tells the Mayor of Leicester he is not fit to be Mayor. Uppitty women are vulnerable to their contemporaries and to those who come after, all of whom want to cut them down to size. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a Church Times reviewer recently wrote of Margery as a self-important, bothersome character, and the torment of her travelling companions and concluded that the true miracles of her life are her indomitable spirit and the fact that anyone put up with her at all. Sexist? Probably. The historian Miri Ruben puts it more subtly saying: *She led an interesting, adventurous and famous life. Her femininity added scandal to her notoriety, but she was tolerated, even admired in England and abroad.*¹

Perhaps the ambivalence towards Margery simply reflects the complexity and humanity which emerges from her book. She comes over as a real human being, not a plaster saint, a human being prepared to go public on her fears, her conflicts and her struggles. Margery risked finding her voice, telling her story and creating a new world. In naming one of rooms the St Martins House after her, we long that it will become a place

- where we and others may find the words and the space and the courage to talk honestly of our own lives and loves,
- that we may overcome fear of rejection and ridicule to risk speech,
- that lives may be transformed as we talk of our experience of God, however vivid, or faint, however familiar, or strange,

¹ The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain the Late Middle Ages Penguin 2005

- and that, through our diverse stories of faith many may come closer to the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

Very Rev'd Vivienne Faull, Dean of Leicester

For Further Reading

The Book of Margery Kempe, Penguin Classics 1994, Margery Kempe, trans and edited B. A. Windeatt

Margery Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England, Lutterworth 2004, Margaret Gallyon

Revelations of Divine Love, Penguin Classics 2003, Julian of Norwich, A.C. Spearing, Elizabeth Spearing

