

Fr James Dunn RIP
Requiem on 100th anniversary of death



FATHER JAMES DUNN
12th February 1841 - 23rd June 1919
Vicar of S John Baptist, Bathwick 1879-1919

Guild of All Souls Chapel, Walsingham
8pm 23rd June 2019

Homily



✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The late nineteenth century was a great revival in Catholic practices in the Church of England, but at the time it was an extremely contentious matter. Those who supported the so-called ritualist practices argued that the Church of England was a branch of the universal church; they believed in the real presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist; that the Eucharist itself should be the central act of Christian worship; and that such worship should be modelled on the worship described in the Book of Revelation including the use of white robes and incense.

Opponents of such ritualism, however, feared that this more ornate form of worship was akin to idolatry – that worshippers were focused more on ritual objects and actions rather than on the things they are meant to symbolize; they rejected the idea of the real presence; and believed that ritualism constituted an attempt to wrest the Church of England from its Protestant identity.

When Fr Dunn was appointed Vicar of St John's Bathwick in 1879, after serving curacies in Milverton, a small village a few miles west of Taunton, and then at the great Anglo-Catholic parish of All Saints, Clifton. St John's already had an Anglo-Catholic tradition established by the earlier clergy of the parish, but Fr Dunn immediately introduced additional catholic practices.

At Easter 1880, Eucharistic vestments were first introduced, and over the years that followed Fr Dunn introduced the use of incense, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and a daily Mass. The church was further beautified, with decorations added to many of the walls, the triptych behind the Blessed Sacrament altar; and the mosaic floor to the sanctuary.

But his innovations were not all to do with ritual. He established a mission house; a link to a local orphanage; established a series of flourishing guilds for both men and women; assisted at the parish school; Bible classes. At one time the children's procession which was a feature of every great festival met in a complete circle around the church.

The centenary history of St John's states that Fr Dunn "taught the faith in all its fullness and by his faithfulness to its doctrines his influence spread far beyond the boundaries of the parish."

But Fr Dunn's catholic practices inevitably brought him into conflict. Members of the local Church Association periodically protested about the style of worship, and various letters were written objecting to the ritualism. Like prominent Anglo-Catholic clergy such as Fr Arthur Tooth (who was briefly imprisoned for ritualism and whose body rests in the shrine church here in Walsingham), Fr Dunn became a victim of such persecution.

And the first open controversy resulted from a lecture that Fr Dunn gave on "Church Authority" at The Guildhall, Bath in 1887 in which he urged church-people to be strict in performing their Christian duties – and among the duties mentioned were "the observance of the days of fasting and abstinence, attendance at the Church's great act of Christian Sacrifice on Sundays and the great festivals, and fasting [before] reception of the Holy Communion." The Bishop of Bath & Wells, Lord Arthur Hervey, publicly censured Fr Dunn for attributing authority to the church "to frame laws for the regulation of the spiritual life of her children." Fr Dunn was strongly supported by members of the parish, nearly 600 of them signing a letter of support.

A few years later, Lord Hervey's successor, Dr George Kennion, requested that Fr Dunn give up certain practices such as the liturgical use of incense and of lights on the altar, but Fr Dunn again strongly defended his liturgical practices and beliefs, stating that these practices had the sanction of the whole Catholic church of which the Church of England was but a part. "I know," he wrote, "that it may be said that such ceremonies are of themselves of little importance, that they can be as you say to me 'in no sense of the essence of worship or doctrine'. But the continuous and persistent attacks made upon them by those who are opposed to the doctrine they symbolize, and the idea of worship to which they give expression show that they have a very great importance as being significant of both doctrine and worship."

As a result of Fr Dunn's resolute stand, the bishop placed a ban on the church, refusing to visit it nor license curates to it nor even allow Fr Dunn to present candidates for

confirmation. But personal support for Fr Dunn in the parish grew ever stronger and the case received national publicity especially after the publication of the Report of the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline in 1906. Fr Dunn received many messages of support for his courageous stand, and from others condemnation of his obstinacy. Bishop Kennion stated of Fr Dunn that “[he is] my one recalcitrant clergyman, and one of the best I possess. He is one of the most straightforward and trustworthy men I have ever had to deal with: there are no dark corners about him, he means what he says and does everything in a very open way.”

It was not until after Fr Dunn’s death, when his successor Fr Charles Harris was continuing the same catholic practices, that Bishop Kennion’s own successor, Bishop Wynne Wilson, ended the ban by visiting St John’s. He was received at the west door with impressive ceremony and was subsequently presented by the congregation with a mitre as a thanksgiving for the ending of the persecution of the parish that had lasted for so many years.

The tragedy of the first world war, during which his own son, also a priest, was killed, together with recurring illness overshadowed the end of Fr Dunn’s life and ministry. He died one hundred years ago today, on the eve of the church’s Patronal Festival. Tributes came from all quarters to his courage and courtesy under trial. In his own words, recorded in the minutes of the last vestry meeting that he attended, Fr Dunn recorded a vote of thanks for his ministry, saying that “it had been a great happiness to him for nearly 40 years to serve in this church. He loved the church and he loved the people.”

As a tribute to him, the church and congregation commissioned the rood screen that dominates the church over the entrance to the choir from the great ecclesiastical architect Sir Ninian Comper.

Writing 40 years after Fr Dunn’s death, the author of the centenary history in 1961, Miss Gertrude Thatcher, states that his influence was still felt at that time. Fr Dunn did so much to establish the catholic practices and tradition of the parish of St John’s Bathwick and those of us who follow in his steps have much to be grateful to him and his ministry. May he rest in peace. Amen.