



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Michaelmas (29th September) 2025

In days of yore, we would have gathered for this Mass in the early morning; but many of you would have struggled to keep your thoughts from what was to come later; because Michaelmas was one of the quarter days when rents and other bills fell due, contracts were signed or came into force and, of course, the new academic year got underway.

This was an instance of what was a pervasive phenomenon: the interweaving of the ecclesiastical and the temporal in such a way that to speak of the secular was something of a nonsense. It was this intertwining of Church and Nation, which made England a Christian country, rather than the simple fact of individuals being Christians and going to church.

The influences flowed both ways. When King Aethelred the Unready was making what proved to be his forlorn attempt to resist the Scandinavian invasion of his realm, as well as strengthening fortifications, expanding the fleet and all the other military preparations, he also issued instructions for the prayer to be offered. This was not a general request that the people pray, but specified the form of Mass to be said and by whom, the specific prayers to be said by monks and nuns as well as the penitential rites to be undertaken by the laity.

There was, however, a much more recent example of this phenomenon. In the wake of the late Queen's death *Youtube*, as it presented itself to me, was devoted almost entirely to streamed Masses of Requiem being offered for Her Majesty's soul: in cathedrals, abbeys and parish churches, including this one, up and down the land. The thought of her death sending such ripples even to the remotest places of our country was a little overawing.

This might well prove to have been the last gasp of England as a Christian nation. Over the last few generations - some would argue since the Reformation - Church and nation have slowly been pulling apart and we can certainly speak of the secular in this land, even if it is a work in progress.

Although we may look with despond on our fading glories, this trend might need not be a matter for lament. As Peter Heather observes in his book, *Christendom*, the price for the Church of being interwoven with the State was often high - sometimes too high for our own good.

Either we can watch helplessly as the tide recedes or we can transfer the task of integrating the rhythms of the Church into daily life to ourselves as individuals and a Christian community. I sometimes reflect during Lent on the disjunction of the penitential character of our Liturgy from lives that continue as always outside these walls. Whilst, of course, there is much more to being a Christian than the infrastructural details of ecclesiastical life, these rhythms are, none-the-less, important in sustaining and developing our Faith, because they bring to mind the things about which we should be thinking and doing either generally or at particular moments in the year. They are expressions of what it is to be a Christian person; but more than that, they provide a common framework of life, which strengthens the bonds of Christian community.

Linking the events of our daily lives can help us to make sense of our experiences. Pope Leo recently commented on the fact that his birthday falls on the Feast of the Holy Cross and the particular resonance that has for him as he pursues his Christian life. Equally, of course, the influence flows the other way: we insert into our ecclesiastical practice the events from our daily lives: birthdays, name days, anniversaries and so on.

Maybe this was true for some of those who gathered for Mass on quarter days: rather than let the temporal concerns distract them from their devotions, they integrated them into their prayer, reflecting on them in the context of their discipleship.