



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

Homily for Saint Luke (18th October) 2024

A couple of years before Providence brought me here, Bishop Martin found the funds to me to follow Hercule Poirot on a boat trip down the Nile: it was one of a sequence of kindnesses, including, of course, nomination to this benefice, which contribute to my remembering fondly him and his episcopate here.

One of the excursions was an early evening visit to Karnak. The visit included as the daylight dissipated a *son et lumière* presentation of the history of the temple. At one point we heard a letter from one of the priests to the Pharaoh Akenaten, who had focused Egyptian religion on worship of the Sun God, neglecting the rest of the traditional pantheon. The priest begs for funds to maintain his temple and was quite a poignant moment in the narrative.

More than that however, there was something quite extraordinary to hear this voice echoing not just through the centuries, but the millennia. Of course, although we can re-construct something of the context from other sources, it is still something of a trace of the past rather than a complete picture of those times: a bit like an unfinished picture where much of the canvass remains blank.

Something similar is true of the New Testament literature, amongst it, of course, the texts attributed to Saint Luke. They, too, are wisps of voices resonating down the centuries. As with the letter from Karnak, we can fill in some of the context from other sources, but much is obscure to us - in the case of Saint Luke, we do not even know anything about the Theophilus to whom the two volumes were addressed.

So, we are left with partial pictures: a bit of detail on a largely blank canvass. Over the generations, artists have very literally filled in the gaps when creating their works: medieval painters portrayed the Blessed Virgin Mary portrayed as courtly lady in a courtly setting; many years ago, my aunt gave me a set of crib figures, miniature versions of a centuries old German original, with all the characters dressed in Tyrolean costume - well, the human ones anyway.

To a purist historical mind, this is all nonsense: they would never have looked like that; but such an approach is to miss the point.

Unlike the temple at Karnak, Christianity is not a dead remnant of history, but an eternally living reality. The gaps on the canvass enable us to paint ourselves into the continuing story of the work of the risen Christ in the world.

This we do not just in artworks, but in the lives that we fashion for ourselves, endeavouring to make of them a context for the divine Purpose, which is indelibly painted onto the canvas. The challenge, of course, is to work out what will be appropriate as a context for the bits of the picture, which are already part of the scene and which we cannot erase.

We might feel a twinge of pathos as the millennia old letter from the priest at Karnak is read out today; but a much more substantial response is required as we hear the words of the New Testament echoing through the centuries, determining not just the character of our own lives, but how we present the living Christ to the world.