

The cost of coal in the 21st century is exclusively measured in terms of environmental impact; yet some of us will remember (maybe with nostalgia) cosying up to a coal fire in the only heated room in the house throughout the winter (though maybe also not so nostalgic about cleaning the grate, setting the fire early in the morning, hoping it would draw properly and not go out on the coldest of days, and of course struggling outside in the vile weather to bring the stuff in...). The impact of coal in this and many communities, however, has long been measured in terms of human lives.

The Markham Disaster of 1973, which claimed 18 lives, was one of the last major mine disasters to take place in Britain; thirteen years earlier in 1960, in one of the last large-scale underground explosions in a British pit, 45 miners were killed at Six Bells in the Monmouthshire valleys.

In 2010 members of the Six Bells community were successful in gaining funding for an impressive memorial to those 45. The Guardian – a massive figure designed by Sebastian Boyesen to be a match for such sculptures as the Angel of the North – was blessed and dedicated on 28th June 2010, even though – in the way of such things, in the valleys at least – his arms had not yet been attached. Rowan Williams – then Archbishop of Canterbury – solemnly read out the names; Jim, a local retired miner who had been sent to carry out maintenance in another section of the pit on that day spoke of his still vivid memories; the minister from the chapel next to the former pithead led prayers; the Bishop of Monmouth blessed and consecrated the statue and memorial; and the Vicar of Six Bells gave a short address.

Saint John's Church, in Six Bells, was in 1960 a tin tabernacle squeezed right into the middle of the main terraced streets of the village. This building was later condemned, and by 2010 it was a Marley concrete prefab, used for all manner of

events, but with a stunningly beautiful sanctuary kept and maintained with fierce pride. And alongside the altar and the sanctuary is the memorial to the 45, which the people of Saint John's had quietly placed there, and kept the anniversary of their death, through all the years when many had forgotten – just quietly, in an unpromising and unimposing building, keeping faith.

The big open-air service in 2010 was largely organised by the then Vicar, who is now for better or worse the Vicar of Chesterfield, and after consulting the people of Saint John's who had kept the memory of the 45 so well, he was told categorically that he should not ask one of the dignitaries to give an address, but he should do it himself 'Because you are the one who represents *us* and you can speak for all of us'.

The 28th June 2010 was a very hot day; the 21st November the following year was cold, windy, damp and nasty. On that day, people gathered again at the now complete memorial figure to welcome a visit by the then Prince of Wales. I was in the receiving line, where all of us got a good chance to chat with Prince Charles, but after the formal business and the guided tour, he got down to doing what he very obviously did best – meeting the people. No doubt to the annoyance of his minders, he chatted and listened and joked until he was very late indeed leaving, and it was the people who had just turned out to wave flags or look at the spectacle who ended up being the most important on that day, and those who went away with a bit of love in their hearts, and a warmth they may not have had before.

Saint John's, Six Bells, may not have the splendour of Westminster Abbey – or indeed of Chesterfield Parish Church – but the thing that really matters was, and still is, there: they kept faith. They did it quietly, they did it without fuss. They provided the enduring foundation on which later people would create a greater

memorial, and even when the memorial has fallen down and is out of memory, they will still be there, keeping faith.

The Coronation ceremony yesterday in Westminster Abbey had at its heart an enormous amount of splendid symbolism, each priceless treasure being a sign to the King that his role, and the role of his predecessors and successors, whoever they may be, must also be about keeping faith. The importance of any Head of State is the ability, in among the pomp and splendour, the marketing of the nation's soft power, the giving of hospitality, the recognition of outstanding community service, to keep faith with the people he or she has vowed to serve, and still in this nation, the God before whom that vow has been made.

The figures of faith presented to us in the scripture readings at this point in Eastertide are both of them reminders to us of the variety of ways in which faith can be kept. Stephen goes out in a blaze of glory, after publicly rebuking the religious authorities. He becomes the first of many martyrs, whose blood in Church tradition is the seed of the kingdom. Thomas has received a less glorious heritage, being known as doubting Thomas, yet legend traces his later work as an apostle in founding churches in the Indian subcontinent, and countless people have come to faith from the very beginnings of Christianity because of the churches planted because of Thomas's witness.

The interplay between glory and humble service in the Coronation is the same interplay we find throughout the history of the Church. The glory is a fine thing if it inspires us to lift our hearts and our aspirations to higher things; yet we can do without that – we cannot do without the humility and service, and the keeping faith. Shortly before he teaches Thomas and Philip that he is the way to the Father, Jesus insists on washing their feet as a sign of service and love. It is such a shocking thing to them that in the passage we heard this morning they clearly still

don't understand it. Indeed, with the benefit of two millennia of reflection, teaching, and example, we still don't seem to get it, for in so many ways the Church is still not known for humble service.

King Charles is as fallible as you and I, though he has been and will be more publicly criticised for his failings. Yet he obviously gets that humble service is the heart of living in God through Jesus Christ, and it is at the heart of keeping faith with his people, and indeed of his people keeping faith with him. He showed this yesterday by inviting to the Coronation so many who have kept faith with the real needs of the people of this nation, from workers in the health and caring professions to the boy in the tent. The message could not have been clearer to those others in the Abbey who wield untold power over the lives of others, and it should be clear to us today, though like even the very close followers and friends of Jesus, we may stubbornly fail to get it.

If King Charles is to keep quiet faith with the commitments he has made to us and to God, he will need to keep faith with Jesus, who will be – as he was for so long for Queen Elizabeth – the Way for him to travel, the Truth for him to learn with integrity, and the Life that will keep him in that truth until the way lies open for him to see that, in eternity, in quiet ways known only to him, God the Father has indeed kept faith with him, and welcomes him into that place Jesus has prepared for him.

And if we too keep faith with the things that really matter, seeking humbly to serve each other – if we have understood and shared the commitment King Charles has made – there are many mansions waiting for us too, where we may all, in the words of Thomas More, 'merrily meet in heaven'. Amen

PC, 6th May 2023