In the week after Christmas 1977 I found myself together with a group of other students spending a day in Ravenna before going on to see in the New Year in Venice. Accommodation and travel were very cheap, and it was possible to do such things quite easily – in fact, we were encouraged to go exploring in the few days of free time we had before philosophy and theology resumed their demands on us.

Ravenna flourished as a port between the fifth and tenth centuries, and as part of the most prosperous trade routes of the time (including the Spice Route and the Silk Road) it was very well-to-do. This is why the churches there contain probably the finest mosaics in the world – which we were there to look at.

Now I have never been a great church crawler, nor do I readily relate to visual art, and mosaics – even the most beautiful ones – only hold an interest for me if there is something about their story that catches my fancy. Apart from this I was hungry and cold, so I spent most of the morning agitating for us to move on. Until we got to the greatest church of all, the basilica of Sant' Apollinare in Classe (the ancient port area). The oohs and the ahhs of the others at the splendid mosaics still turned me off, as I skirted round the edges of the church building and there discovered the plaques and memorial tablets that ranged through from the second and third centuries to the tenth century and beyond. Suddenly I was fascinated, as I could trace the development of the early Italian language all the way through from classical Latin, complete with consonantal shifts and changes in vowel sounds, and I had in the end to be prised out of the place so that we could be on time for the train to Venice.

I am telling this story because I want straight away to bust the very common myth that the so-called Dark Ages, and the Middle Ages that followed, were a

dead monolithic period of at best stagnation and at worst retreat in the development of human knowledge and civilisation. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I intend to bust some other myths too. If people think about the millennium between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginnings of the Renaissance, it is usually with the idea that life was universally like the famous misquote from Hobbes – nasty, brutish and short; that it was all about religious and dynastic wars and the oppression of women and peasants; that the Church existed to deny access to education and to amass wealth, and so on. And let's be honest: these things were all part of the picture of that thousand-year period (just as they continue to be part of our apparently enlightened existence today). But there was far more going on than that, so without putting on my rose-tinted spectacles it is the positive aspects of the Church in that period which I want to describe this evening. I will offer some thoughts on the Church in relation to power and wealth; on the Church in relation to education and thinking; and also on the new and radical ways of living Christian life which developed during that period.

With the fall of the Roman Empire, the centres of power surrounding the Mediterranean divided into three groupings: those areas in the west which largely came under the influence of Germanic tribes who later gave way to the Normans; those areas in the east which were ruled by the rump of the old empire, based in Constantinople; and the southern shores of the Mediterranean which increasingly gave way to the rise of Arabic culture, especially with the coming of Islam in the 7th century. Hill towns in Italy developed as an easier way to defend against repeated raids from Moors (north Africans) and Saracens

(Arabic fighters), and the low-level skirmishing warfare throughout the Mediterranean Basin and indeed much of Europe continued for many centuries, made worse by the Arab capture of Jerusalem and the Crusader armies that were raised to try and take it back, with mixed success.

The Church in this period became quite dependent on who was in power and whether he (occasionally she) had been baptised. To move closer to home, the attempts of Augustine and Mellitus to establish bases in Canterbury and London only succeeded with the conversion of Ethelbert of Kent and Saebert of Essex, and it was King Oswald's rule that led to the establishment of the Church in Northumbria.

The Great Schism of 1054 can be seen in the context of the power rivalry between Rome and Constantinople, between East and West. The presenting issue was whether the version of the Nicene Creed recited in church should affirm that the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son (Western version) or whether the older version stating that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father should be retained. Whether the Church of Rome had authority to edit the words of the Creed or not, the power struggle between the Churches mirrors the power struggle between two beleaguered former great powers.

The contrast between the using of worldly power for the Church's good or to the Church's harm continued. One of the greatest philosophers and theologians to become Archbishop of Canterbury – Saint Anselm – had also the tendency to speak truth to power, and so he got himself exiled twice, once by William II and once by Henry I. Thomas Becket got himself killed. Yet it was the patronage of kings and princes that led to the establishment of schools and then universities which furthered the work of developing human thought and civilisation. As

early as 1088 in Bologna, a co-operative effort began to develop study of rediscovered texts that had been thought destroyed by the repeated invasions at the end of the Roman Empire, and such co-operative work developed over time into formal university structures. Teaching in Oxford is known to have taken place in 1096, and here both the secular power (the King) and the Church sought frequently either to control or to encourage the development of creative thought.

It may come as a surprise in the light of the Islamist destruction of the priceless manuscript library at Timbuktu in 2013, or the systematic desecration of the ancient temple and tombs at Palmyra by Islamic State in 2015, that a major basis of the growth of learning in the Middle Ages depended on the honourable tradition of scholarship which formed part of Islam from its inception. It was Islamic scholars who rediscovered and eventually shared many of the works of Greek and Roman antiquity that had been thought lost, and the development of new strands of philosophy and theology in the 12th and 13th centuries (at about the time this church was being built) owed a great deal to them.

We should not let the development of the inquisitions in the later Middle Ages stop us from admiring the inquiring creative and learned minds which threw light on the heritage of Christian faith – people like Thomas Aquinas or William of Ockham, who travelled, debated and disputed with the best minds of the age. To read any of Thomas's work is to discover a world of thought spanning ages and cultures, testing out thinking newly rediscovered in some work of Aristotle, or arguing through a philosophical point found in the work of Islamic scholars like Avicenna (Ibn Sima – also known as the father of modern medicine) and

Averroes (Ibn Rushd, who came from Andalusia in the 12th century when what we now know as Spain was largely under Islamic rule).

There is an open-mindedness and a thirst for knowledge in these scholars and teachers which acts as a breath of fresh air in the midst of the nasty fog of prejudice, religious war and persecution that also existed throughout this period.

Many of these great figures in the Church were, like Anselm and Thomas, part of the rich pattern of monastic life which had arisen partly out of the flight from the world of people like the Desert Fathers, and then from the organisation into communities under vow that began with the Rule of Saint Benedict. To these communities may be added the large number of hermits, anchorites and others (like Margery Kempe) who lived with the tension between their own total religious commitment and the obligations of family life. Later would come the great reforming movements of the Franciscans and Dominicans, with itinerant preaching and living on charity being keynotes of their religious commitment.

In the later Middle Ages, monasteries were like huge local businesses, some of them indeed being multinational. They organised the farming of the land, the production of food, the manufacture of necessary and ornamental household items, the continuation of learning through the copying of manuscripts as well as the work of schools linked with the monasteries and the universities they also supported. Later writing, especially from the various times in different nations when monasteries were suppressed so that their soft power and financial strength could be vested in central government, suggests that they were widely corrupt, but much more recent study offers the view that, while there may well have been corruption in places, the monastic enterprise was of great benefit to

society in general, and certainly more benign than the private land ownership in the hands of the wealthy few which followed when the monasteries were gone.

Monastic foundations also bucked the trend of what is now known as patriarchy, with communities of nuns and canonesses being at least as powerful as their male counterparts, and abbesses carrying considerable clout in the corridors of power. Women in the Church of today looking for role models have found them in the Middle Ages: Hildegard, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe are among the better-known names.

As before, I have offered a very superficial gallop over a period of around 1,000 years, and there is an awful lot more that could have been said. As before, if you are interested in learning more I can offer reading suggestions – just ask. And as before, I am going to conclude by drawing out a few things we might learn from the Dark Ages and Middle Ages.

Even when challenged by the least promising aspects of human life and behaviour, strong and convinced minds can speak out and bring light to the living and passing on of the faith.

The Church always has more to learn from men and women of good will, especially from those who differ most from what the Church thinks it stands for.

The Church flourishes both when caught up in the warp and weft of everyday life, and also when withdrawn from the world and dedicated to God alone.

As in the general attitudes to the centuries covered by this address, and also in the attitudes taken by people of today in particular to the sciences of philosophy and theology, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. We need to

approach all learning with the humility of such great figures as Thomas, Julian and Anselm.

And so I leave you this evening with a prayer of Saint Anselm, which is also quite appropriate for this season of Lent.

Lord Jesus Christ;
Let me seek you by desiring you,
and let me desire you by seeking you;
let me find you by loving you,
and love you in finding you.

I confess, Lord, with thanksgiving,
that you have made me in your image,
so that I can remember you, think of you, and love you.

But that image is so worn and blotted out by faults,
and darkened by the smoke of sin,
that it cannot do that for which it was made,
unless you renew and refashion it.

Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height,
for my understanding is in no way equal to that,
but I do desire to understand a little of your truth
which my heart already believes and loves.

I do not seek to understand so that I can believe,
but I believe so that I may understand;
and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe,
I shall not understand.

PC, 16th March 2025