

***Compline at the Church of St Mary and All Saints, Fotheringhay
Thursday 29th July 2010***

I'm asked to say a few words about this evening's service. COMPLINE is the last service of the monastic day, following on from Prime, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None and Vespers. It is called Compline because it 'completes' (latin COMPLETORIUM) the liturgical day. It would have been said or sung each day at Fotheringhay in 1460.

COMPLINE centres round the recitation of the Song of Simeon (Luke 2 29-32) known to Anglicans by the Latin title Nunc Dimittis. The wording of this canticle provides a fitting ending to a whole day of worship, together with its antiphon 'Save us O Lord' which prays that, awake or asleep, we may always rest in Christ.

Some of this evening's service is in Latin. In 1460 the whole of it would have been in Latin. Latin became the language of the Western Church (replacing Greek) in 3rd century a.d. It is a very rhythmical language, making it easy to sing, and even easier to commit to memory. It carries profound meanings and communicates not only by the words themselves, but also by the order in which they are placed (the 'syntax'). The Christian Faith was handed down in Latin for over 1,000 years, until Archbishop Cranmer produced the first English Prayer Book in 1549.

TONIGHT'S SERVICE is 'Compline for the Dead' and encourages us to pray for the departed, especially Richard, Duke of York. Prayer for the departed would have been a regular part of every service in 1460. Today some Christians find it a difficult concept, as though we were asking God to reverse his judgement on those who have died. But our prayers for the Departed always include the word 'May'. We are simply commending our loved ones into God's hands (a natural thing to do) rather than Giving God his Orders'. You can check this by looking at the wording of the commendation 'In Paradisum' at the end of this evening's service. The word 'may' occurs no less than four times.

FINALLY in this service you will find a hymn in honour of the Virgin Mary - 'Ave Regina Caelonin' - Welcome Queen of Heaven. This hymn would have ended every single day at Fotheringhay in 1460. It still does today in the monasteries and seminaries of the RC church - I had to learn it off by heart during my 5 years as the Anglican Bishop in Rome. It does not pray directly to Mary, but asks her to pray to Jesus Christ for us. It is a longer version of the prayer known to many of us as the 'Hail Mary'.

So we join the prayer of the Church as it would have been said and sung in 1460. As always, our worship transcends time and space and unites us with the angels, archangels, the saints and all those who have worshipped here in the past, including Richard, Duke of York, himself.