

Sermon on St Andrew's Day, 30 November 2022

by Rev. Bill Church

St Andrew



30 November is not a brilliant day to have your Patronal Festival.

You would be reckless to have an outdoor fete, and sometimes (like this year) it gets mixed up with Advent, which is supposed to be a time of abstinence, not of jolly festivities.

But there we are. In Hertford and at Little Berkhamsted and at Stanstead Abbots and the City of London, Andrew is our saint.

We don't know much about Andrew. We know more about him than many of the other 12 apostles; but not much and not nearly as much as we would like to know.

In every field of life, and that includes religion, where there are gaps in people's knowledge, you get:

Myth. Useful truths expressed in frameworks that are not factual, in the sense of evidence that would not stand up in court or in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

Speculation. Using a thimbleful of knowledge to brew up a kettleful of story.

Invention. Whether well-intentioned or aiming at selfish gain or for fun – but just making it up.

This sermon would rank as speculation.

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, it is Andrew who brings his brother Simon (later Peter) to follow Jesus.

Andrew is observant -he notices Jesus.

He has the gift of discernment - he rightly sees Jesus as numinous, someone from whom godliness shines, the Messiah.

He is inquisitive – he spends a whole afternoon with Jesus finding out about him.

He is communicative - he tells his brother all about Jesus.

At the feeding of the five thousand, it is Andrew who introduces to Jesus the little boy who has five loaves and two small fishes. Andrew is approachable enough for the boy to come to him and respectful enough not to reject the apparently tiny contribution.

And in chapter 12 of John's Gospel, Andrew and Philip bring to Jesus "some Greeks". "Greeks" probably means Greek speaking Jews or adherents to the Jewish faith, rather than actual Greeks. Very many of the Jews outside Palestine used Greek as their everyday language and used as their scripture not the Hebrew Bible but the Septuagint, a translation into Greek of the OT.

Why Philip and Andrew? They were the only apostles with Greek names.

We know that Andrew was a Jew but his name is Greek, meaning "manly".

Why did his father (Jonah) and his brother (Simon) have good Jewish names, but he had a Greek name (and Philip bore the name of Philip of Macedon!)?

This reminds us that despite some exclusionist tendencies among Jews keen to emphasise their religious and cultural separateness, Roman Palestine, and particularly Galilee, was a very mixed place.

Was Andrew even a name given at birth? Or was it a nickname, a sobriquet, a label intended to express what he had become as a grown man, in the same way as the names borne by Peter and Barnabas?

Maybe "Andrew" was meant to point to a man confident in his standing, standing out among others, a man whom enquirers could trust?

Maybe Andrew's ability to have a foot in both camps enabled him to bring those Greeks to Jesus.

Maybe that is why he is seen as the patron saint of missionaries, as well as of Scotland, Greece, Romania and Russia.

Certainly, his name has travelled well. And I think the Andrew about whom I have been speculating is a good model for those who seek to bring people to Christ – not so much in the sense of going to a foreign mission field as in showing forth Christ in the place where we are.

If we are observant, discerning, enquiring and communicative.... If we are approachable and if we welcome people respectfully, those who bring gifts however small.... If we use the bridges we have to people from other backgrounds.... Then we can rightfully claim Andrew as our patron saint.