

2824: St Faith's Great Crosby, Waterloo, Liverpool, England



Mystery Worshipper: Gregory the Grate.

The church: St Faith's Great Crosby, Waterloo, Liverpool, England.

Denomination: Church of England, Diocese of Liverpool.

The building: A Victorian Gothic dark red brick building adorned with flying buttresses, a circular bell tower, and a green copper steeple. The imposing interior is flooded with natural light from the clear glazed east window and clerestory. The wide, lofty nave is graced by a finely carved and delicately decorated oak screen. There were seven sanctuary lamps gently swinging. A gold triptych reredos depicts the four evangelists and Jesus on the Cross with Our Lady and St John. The blue carpeted Lady chapel features a "little house" style tabernacle for the reserved Sacrament and a statue known as the Rabbit Madonna, after the rabbits nestled at the Virgin's feet. This is the work of a nun named Mother Maribel, whose carvings can be found in many churches and cathedrals, including St Paul's. (Rabbits are sometimes seen as representing the Virgin Birth – scholars as far back as Aristotle have known that rabbits can conceive while pregnant, a phenomenon known as superfoetation, thus making it seem that they can bear offspring without having had intercourse.) Interestingly, Mother Maribel's statue depicts the infant Jesus with only four toes on one foot and a normal complement of toes on the other.

The church: Here is a church that seems to play a big part in the community. There is a multiplicity of things going on: concerts, socials (e.g. pancake party and girls' nights out), parish lunches, support groups – you name it. They call their building repair fund "Raise the Roof." St Faith's has always had a colourful history for its high-church shenanigans. Tram conductors have been known to call out, "Change here for Rome!" at the stop just outside the church. A gentleman boarding the bus with me after the service said, "Been to St Faith's, have you? I'm RC myself, and they're more Catholic than we are!"

The neighbourhood: This is a vibrant area indeed! It is densely populated, with

streets of terraced houses, Victorian semis, shops, and dentist and doctors surgeries. The local railway station at Waterloo bears commuters in and out of the city. The pleasing Victoria Park has tennis courts and a bowling green. As a youth, Robert Runcie (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1980 to 1991) was educated at Merchant Taylor's Public School over the road from St Faith's, the church he and his sister attended. Runcie is depicted in one of the church's stained glass windows. Nearby is Nazareth House, a retirement home run by the Poor Sisters of Nazareth. The Plaza Cinema, saved from demolition and now privately run, shows the latest films. The church stands in its own grounds on the corner of Crosby Road North and Kingsway, next to Tesco Extra (also open on Sundays).

The cast: The Revd Dr Susan J. Lucas, vicar ("Who'd have thought it? A woman vicar in there!" exclaimed the gentleman on the bus) was the celebrant and preacher. There were two servers sporting crimson cassocks and cream-coloured cottas.

The date & time: Sunday Next Before Lent: 15 February 2015, 11.00am.

What was the name of the service?

Eucharist and Holy Baptism.

How full was the building?

Just over half full.

Did anyone welcome you personally?

I was greeted by a smiling lady handing out the books. A gentleman was keen to show me round. A couple of people in the baptism party said hello. Indeed, I was welcomed throughout, over and over. A small girl in her Sunday best (little pink and red frilly frock) ran up to me and put her arms around my legs. "I like you!" she said.

Was your pew comfortable?

I didn't really notice at first – I was too busy juggling my papers and dropping things, but overall it was OK. It could have done with a pew runner or padded cushion.

How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere?

When I arrived, the choir were tuning up in the vestry, running through the music. The after-service coffee was being got ready. I could smell charcoals being lighted somewhere off-stage. The organist was warming up. Not many were engaged in chatter; it was the quietest pre-service atmosphere I have experienced for some time. As I sat there, I felt quite relaxed and looking forward to the service. The joyful shriek of a baby announced the arrival of the baptism candidate!

What were the exact opening words of the service?

"Good morning, everyone, and welcome to church this morning."

What books did the congregation use during the service?

Printed order of service with green cover for the eucharist; separate printed order of service for baptism. I forgot to make a note of which hymn book it was; it had a red cover. We were also given a pew sheet and a printed handout giving details of Lent services and activities.

What musical instruments were played?

Pipe organ, expertly played. A choir of six ladies and three men were robed in black cassocks and white surplices.

Did anything distract you?

Great clouds of thick smoke with a pleasing aroma billowed across the nave. A shaft of sunlight filtered in through the stained glass and through the incense, lighting up the altar. Nice effect, but distracting.



Was the worship stiff-upper-lip, happy clappy, or what?

Liberal Anglo-Catholic. The baby was anointed with holy oils. The hymns were traditional: "We have a Gospel to proclaim", "Be Thou my vision", and so on.

Exactly how long was the sermon?

7 minutes.

On a scale of 1-10, how good was the preacher?

8 – The vicar didn't use notes and was concise and to the point – no waffling! She captured our imaginations.

In a nutshell, what was the sermon about?

Being washed whiter than snow in baptism. She asked if we remembered the washing powder that was advertised in the old days as "adding bright bright brightness." The child (she said) would be whiter than the brightest white after the baptism. The baby's name is Austin, a shortening of the name Augustine – a great saint of Canterbury and doctor of the church.

Which part of the service was like being in heaven?

At 12 noon, time stood still momentarily as the Angelus rang out over Great Crosby.

And which part was like being in... er... the other place?

I am a fan of incense – I like it. On this occasion, however, the incense was burning in a shallow dish on the nave altar steps. From my vantage point in the nave I espied the server topping up the vessel with extra charcoal and several spoons of incense grains. You could have sent smoke signals! It was so thick, obliterating the proceedings and making the celebrant cough.

What happened when you hung around after the service looking lost?

It was somebody's birthday and we sang "Happy Birthday" just before the service finished. We were invited to share with the cake and the usual refreshments. I made my way to the back as per the invitation from a lady (one of the churchwardens) and a man.

How would you describe the after-service coffee?

Fair trade tea and coffee in china mugs decorated with a picture of St Faith's Church in blue. I had a cup of coffee (black, no sugar), a piece of birthday cake, and a piece of light fruit cake. It was all very tasty. Biscuits were also available. Various people came and chatted with me. I didn't know them from Adam, but they were hospitable and welcoming. The lady vicar spoke to me too. She is tall and slim, with a merry face and dangly silver earrings. She looks at you keenly and listens to what you say.

How would you feel about making this church your regular (where 10 = ecstatic, 0 = terminal)?

8 – St Faith's is a very welcoming church. I liked the friendliness and the easy going nature of its people.

Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?

Yes, definitely. I really felt part of St Faith's that morning, and I would gladly join their church. Smoke signals, birthday cake and baptism, all in one go!



What one thing will you remember about all this in seven days' time?
The way the sunlight lit up all the smoke.

Coming soon: background, explanation and comment