Trinity College Cambridge
19 October 2014

# A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN BRITAIN IN 7 OBJECTS

## The Age of Becket
## *The Raising of Lazarus* – two 12th century sculpture reliefs in Chichester Cathedral

Deuteronomy 24: 17–22  John 11: 30–44

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The Raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus is one of the most dramatic events in the whole Bible, and one of the most moving, as told by John in his seventeenth chapter. But the dramatic and the moving in the text of the scripture does not always translate into great pictorial art. One has only to think of all those static images of Pentecost, into which artists have failed to breathe any fire, to appreciate this.

However, the twin sculptured reliefs representing the Raising of Lazarus, of which I am about to speak, are two of the greatest English works of stone sculpture ever, and perhaps the greatest from twelfth-century England. They date from about 1140, and there is general agreement that they are indeed English.

These are mystery works of arts. They are clearly by two different sculptors, albeit working together. We can name neither. We cannot even say where they came from: if from Chichester, then surely by peripatetic artists, for there is no known Chichester background, nor indeed any other known background to them. Yes influences, such as Anglo-Saxon and the German Rhineland; but no hard and fast background or location. Nor artistically do they lead on in any known direction. Nor do we know for where or for what purpose they were originally made, certainly not to adorn the south choir aisle of Chichester Cathedral, where they now hang. They only became known in 1829, when they were discovered built into a wall behind the canons' stalls in the Cathedral. They are like Melchizedech, who was thought of as having no father or mother, who appears out of nowhere as the great king priest, and who promptly disappears into nowhere again.

In our sculptures, the one miracle is divided into two scenes, the first on the right, the pleading of the sisters with Jesus, and then the actual raising of Lazarus from the dead. In the first scene, the two sisters are highlighted by the architecture and by the whole pyramidal construction of the work. Also highlighted is the humanity as well as the

divinity of Christ, the divinity by his solemn and towering figure, the humanity by his sympathetic gaze and by the bodily three-dimensionality of the sculpture. See in particular how the rounded head stands out from his halo. Of this relief it has been said: 'sorrow and supplication, pity and unapproachable majesty, have rarely been expressed in sculpture with equal intensity.'

The Raising of Lazarus being divided into two scenes was not uncommon by the twelfth century. I think that the rationale of this here is to show that the miracle of Jesus is not only a wonder-work demonstrating his divine power, but also very much a work of compassion expressing his human love. That would be in harmony with the surprisingly original thought being put forward by Peter Abelard in Paris at almost exactly the same time – that the primary purpose of the Incarnation was to draw human beings to God through love of the human Jesus.

If the left-hand relief, representing the actual miracle, lacks the compositional coherence of the right-hand one, nonetheless the elongate figures, with their intensity of gaze, remind me faintly of the finest statuary in the rococo churches of South Germany. Also, this sculptor had something of a Mozartian, or Shakespearian, gift for depicting low life. The Sussex yokels, or grave-diggers, who strain to remove the lid from the grave, brilliantly set off the solemn scene happening above them.

I would particularly draw your attention, however, to one detail in this second relief, which has not received the attention it deserves. Lazarus's sisters, at the centre of the action in the first relief, are relegated to a sort of shelf in the second. They are seen in bust, as if looking on from a gallery. Iconographically, this arrangement of putting two women on a shelf, for example in scenes of the Pieta, could have been known in England from Byzantine ivories. But there is nothing in that iconography to prepare one for these two sisters, who, emotionally, are not at all left on the shelf! The face of the sister behind is still simply grief-ridden; but the one with the better view is another matter. The sculptor has obviously tried to represent her face at the very moment when grief is giving way to awe-stricken astonishment. Once one notices this face, it is hard to look at anything else. It is as if the sculptor were inviting the onlooker to observe and reflect on the whole miracle through the eyes of this sister of Lazarus.

It was characteristic of later Romanesque sculpture (as of early Gothic) to try to breathe inner life into its figures, and also to engage the onlooker, sometimes, as here, through the channel of a participant in the scene. That was an aspect of the Christian humanism of the so-called Twelfth-Century Renaissance. But there is a further point here. It is an example of how there was a great increase attached to the value of women's religious and spiritual experience. One sees this everywhere in the mid-twelfth century. Leading the field was the Rhineland mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. Her visions, a mixture of the cosmic,

the theological, and the fiery, made her famous almost overnight. Bishops, abbots, and rulers consulted her from all over western Christendom, and she became their confidante. Not far behind her was another Rhineland mystic, Elizabeth of Schönau. It was her visions of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven that made this idea widely acceptable for the first time in the West. Meanwhile here in England, a major Benedictine abbot, Geoffrey of St Albans, is presented by the hagiographer of the recluse, Christina of Markyate, as owing his whole spiritual life and vision to the prophetic power and prayers. 'He supported her materially,' says this contemporary author; 'she commended him to God more earnestly in her prayers.' I could go on and on.

All this is of course a matter of degree compared with before. There never was a time when women's prayers were not valued. And I am not sure, either, that this is so much a matter of gender as it might at first seem. When the development of interiority in religion starts to outpace that of exterior forms, the priestly mediator among praying human beings becomes less important, because men and women are relying more on their inner spiritual resources to commune with God. Thus gender decreases in relevance in this communing. And with the enormous impact of St Bernard and the Cistercians on the twelfth-century world, interiority of religion was greatly on the increase.

This brings me to my last point about the whole mode of personal prayer implied in the Chichester reliefs. There was a long Christian tradition of prayer, exemplified in late Medieval England by Walter Hilton's *Ladder of Perfection* and particularly by the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, which had it that if one wanted to be join in union with God, one must empty the mind of all images, and ascend to a state of mental passivity in a kind of prayer of quiet. Totally other was it for the most part in twelfth-century England, particularly with the great English Cistercian, Ailred of Rievaulx. Only 20 years or so after our reliefs, Ailred wrote a treatise on how to pray, perhaps significantly for a woman, namely his recluse sister. His advice was for her to put herself in the shoes of those around Christ, especially the women, and to imagine, to remember, and to think, on their experience. Amongst his many examples he did not include the Raising of Lazarus. Yet in our reliefs, the further forward of the two sisters might for all the world be Ailred's sister, applying her brother's methods. And we, the onlookers, with her.