

The Christian Summer Festival Scene – A Tourist Reflects

Tradition is a feature of Church life that is almost unique to Anglicanism. It is an exquisite irony that black-scarf conservative evangelicals, arm-waving charismatics, myth-busting liberals and incense-swinging Anglo-Catholics all claim to be faithful members of the same communion. To other denominations it is bizarre and inexplicable. To us Anglicans, despite the odd fallout and blow-up, it is a matter of delight.

If you want to see Anglican tradition (or tribalism) at its best (or worst), then what you need is a little summer tour because, despite the fact that heavy rain in July and August is as inevitable as death, we all set off for our various outdoor events. This year I managed three in three weeks: the Keswick Convention, New Wine and the Walsingham Youth Pilgrimage.

At Keswick, the Gospel is a serious affair. The worship leader takes us through a selection of traditional hymns and seemingly worship songs without so much as dreaming of cracking a smile. Well-thumbed, leather-bound Bibles are clamped like life-jackets beneath the arms of earnest evangelicals. People come for the preaching which is sound, gimmick-free and grown-up, the crowd clinging to any opportunity for a polite laugh with the tenacity of Harry Potter with the snitch.

But there is a simplicity and an honesty to Keswick which makes it oddly attractive. It is a gathering that is proud of its long history, entrance is still free of charge, and there is a pleasing wholesomeness to the event. The preaching is enormously impressive in its intellectual rigour and, whilst it may not be to everyone's taste, the purpose of the conference to sit beneath and be converted by the Word is never diluted.

In the afternoons, families take to the hills, and the top of Cat Bells was populated by large numbers of absurdly healthy, bright-eyed boys and girls proudly sporting Keswick wristbands and basking luxuriantly in all that children need – fresh air, food, faith and an extravagant abundance of love. It may strictly speaking have been hors-convention, but that will be my abiding memory.

By contrast, at New Wine, the Gospel is a very jolly thing. Everyone is happy and smiley, and whilst it was my first visit, the impression that I had stepped into an alien environment dissolved three minutes in with the first hug. There is a powerful sense of the immanence of God which means anything could happen, and it usually does. Arms were waved, tears were shed, miracles happened, spontaneous laughter erupted. The music is so loud that the babies are fitted with noise resistant headphones (and I'm not making that up). It's impossible so much as to visit the lavatory without at least three people praying for you, and with enough coffee being drunk to slow the recession in the South American economy, that happens a lot.

A major difference is the teaching. Whilst the preaching at Keswick is about the reinforcement of a traditional protestant atonement theology, New Wine has a strong desire for a proclamation that is relevant to the immediate needs and aspirations of the culture. Though at times the Scriptures appear to be more illustrative than fundamental, there is no doubting the immediacy and attractiveness of this, and it is surely a reason for the huge growth of this movement.

My visit was fleeting but enjoyable. It rained (a lot) and the Somerset countryside can't really compare with the Lake District. But there was plenty of good company, Pimm's and pulled pork.

Above all the festival has a powerful energy focused on a passionate belief in the local church as the hope of the world and a real sense that we can go back home to make a difference.

At Walsingham the Gospel is noisy and very muddy. The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham has often been described as the, 'only truly working class institution in the Church of England'. So whilst Keswick and New Wine were both overwhelmingly white and middle class, at the Youth Pilgrimage it is multi-cultural, council estate Britain that comes out to pray. Oh, and with a lively crowd of Swedish Lutherans thrown in for good measure.

The whole event was nearly blown away by a vast gale from the North Sea, a weather event swiftly named Storm Richeldis after the Shrine's eleventh century foundress. Even without a force 6, the Youth Pilgrimage is not a place to be if peace and quiet is your goal. For an adult, industrial strength earplugs, wellingtons and boundless supplies of patience are essentials.

The worship is a heady mix of traditional pilgrimage devotions such as the Daily Mass, Benediction and Candlelit Processions, all spiced up to engage with 11 to 18 year olds. Music is provided by an incomparable Roman Catholic worship band called CJM, and included everything from 'My Lighthouse' to 'Sweet Sacrament Divine.' It would be unwise to comment on the preaching because I was doing it, but the theme of the teaching was identity as the young pilgrims explored what it means to imitate Mary in finding our true selves through relationship with her Son. The level of response and engagement was profoundly moving. If you think that sacramental and liturgical worship lacks what it takes to convert the young, you need to come to the Youth Pilgrimage.

The sheer commitment and time that organisers, mostly volunteers, put into these three events is really extraordinary and all three are highly professional affairs. I'm not sure I learnt much, but I had a lot of fun. Where next year I wonder?

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August 2017