

## Bangor Chaplaincy Thought for the Week

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Many years ago, the city of Bangor became twinned with the city of Kazan, the capital of the Tartar Republic in the U.S.S.R.

One of the famous monasteries that existed in that region before the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the Seven Lakes Monastery, founded in the 17th century. Following the Revolution, like most monasteries, convents and churches, it was closed. The year of its closure was 1926. Much of the building was then destroyed.

In 1649 the 27 monks lived by gardening, but its wealth like the wealth of any monastic community - is measured in the spiritual treasures associated with it – above all, in the holiness achieved by its monks or nuns.

The Russian Church in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had many saintly spiritual guides – *'startsi'* - in whom the grace of God was abundantly manifested in their lives, particularly in the gift of spiritual discernment, and the Seven Lakes Monastery was no exception - one of its *'startsi'* dying as recently as 1915, eleven years before the forced closure of the monastery. Those were dark days indeed, with only three bishops having some freedom to function in the whole Soviet Union whilst their colleagues had been brutally liquidated or were languishing in concentration camps such as the Solovki Monastery in the far north which had been turned in to a concentration camp for clergy, monks and nuns.

Among the great spiritual treasures of the Seven Lakes Monastery was the Seven Lakes Icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Such icons are associated with the particular places in which they are located or were once located, for example Vladimir, Kazan, Pochaev, Częstochowa, Svyatogorsk, Tabynsk and many other places. These icons are proclamations of the Christian belief in the Incarnation – namely that Jesus Christ, as well as being fully Divine is fully human, and like each one of us, was born of a woman in a particular place at a particular time in human history.

Amongst the expressions of Christian faith that came abruptly to an end with the collapse of the Russian Empire were religious processions. No longer would there be these visible, festive proclamations that God is with us in the ordinariness of our lives – in the streets of towns and villages, in the civic centres, amongst the poor and the wealthy, amongst those with faith and amongst those with neither faith nor hope.

Such processions also took place at times of crisis. There had been famous processions around Kazan with the Seven Lakes Icon - in 1654 when 400,000 people had been killed by a plague in Moscow and already 40,000 had died in Kazan and again in 1771 when another pestilence had attacked Kazan.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the new government embarked on its attempted elimination of all religious faith and practice throughout the U.S.S.R., and this applied to all religions. By the 1930s, no more than 3,000 churches remained open of the 50,000 that existed before the Revolution, and only a hand-full of the 1,000 monasteries were still open. Church attendance could cost a person their career. Only three bishops remained free – the rest had been liquidated or were languishing in prisons or in the Solovki Monastery in the far north which had been turned into a concentration camp for clergy, monks and nuns, and in which innumerable of them died the death of martyrs.

During this nightmare which lasted so many years, the few churches that remained open were kept open largely by the 'babushki' ('grandmothers'). The babushki were an indomitable army who regarded it as their duty to guard the Faith and expressions of faith in whatever way they could. They had no job to lose if they attended church. They prayed at home and kept worship going in church. They had their grandchildren secretly baptised and taught them about God and about Church life when they could.

Against the odds, this is what the babushki of Kazan did during those dark times. Knowing that the procession with the Seven Lakes Icon had been a sign of hope in previous dark times, they decided that they would replicate the procession. But how could it be done? The appearance of a religious procession on the streets of the city would attract the attention of the authorities within minutes, and severe retribution would follow. No – there had to be another way. The babushki knew that they were inconspicuous – every Russian community has many babushki – easily recognised with their scarves around their faces, and politically powerless and of no apparent threat to the regime. And because they had hope, and because they believed that God is with us in dark times as well as celebratory times, they would walk prayerfully in a small cluster, along the route that had been taken in the past by the Seven Lakes Icon processions, and they would do this, carrying an icon hidden from sight – their symbolic action being a powerful symbol of faith and hope for a better future. My understanding is that the babushki of Kazan did this for many years, and that it was the Seven Lakes Icon itself which one of them carried hidden under a coat.

And times changed, and the hope of the babushki was realised. Churches reopened and the oppression of believers came to an end. The Seven Lakes Monastery is being restored and the grandchildren which the babushki made sure had received baptism can now worship freely. No doubt many of these grandchildren are serving God in diverse ways – some, no doubt, in churches kept open by the babushki, others in newly opened churches. Some of the people who regarded the babushki as ignorant and unenlightened now thank them for their mammoth achievement.

Our lives have changed almost overnight. Life is now lived very differently from how we lived life even six months ago. We wonder for how long the new situation will persist and how to cope with the present. Around us are people who are keeping life going and bringing hope to our lives and helping us 'hang on'. There are the extraordinary heroes working in health care and who place themselves in very vulnerable settings in the line of duty. Around us also are people doing very ordinary things that help us retain as much normality as possible. The utilities are kept going, transport is available, the roads are maintained, and week after week, a very ordinary group of people undertake the circuit of our towns, cities and villages, not without risk, collecting our bins and recycled material whilst colleagues of theirs keep the streets clean. My father taught me that it is important always to greet the person who cleans the streets. He was right. Sometimes I have the opportunity to thank these frontline heroes who collect the rubbish. As well as being courageous, they are always gracious, positive, patient, courteous and conscientious. They no more think of themselves as heroes than the babushki of Kazan did as they walked around their city.

The pandemic offers us an opportunity to treasure the ordinary, to find God in the ordinariness of our daily routine and the people around us, and, if we do not believe in God, to find hope in the fact of being here, being alive and being able to get on with the ordinary, humble and inconspicuous components of life as we now live it, and to believe – like the babushki of Kazan - that it is not futile to live in hope and to act in hope.

The Seven Lakes Icon is now kept in the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul in Kazan, and a copy of it in the Seven Lakes Monastery. The faith and hope of the babushki were not in vain.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

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