

*A sermon given on the Feast of All Saints, Sunday, November 1, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Relics of the Past, Faith of the Present

The line was long, but we felt sure it would be worth the wait. Hundreds of miles north of Rome, in the old university city of Padua, in the summer of 2001, my family and I visited the imposing Basilica of St. Anthony. The line in which we stood stretched the length of the north aisle, up the side of the church, and around to a special chapel behind the high altar. There, in a baroque golden niche, stands the Reliquary of the Tongue of the saint. Yes, the tongue of St. Anthony. Anthony, a young follower of St. Francis of Assisi in the 13th century, was above all, an outstanding preacher. So the Tongue of St. Anthony is venerated especially because it was the gift of speech which gave his life meaning. I can tell you that seeing a disembodied tongue preserved for veneration is bound to leave you ... speechless.

A new book by Peter Manseau is entitled *Rag and Bone: A Journey Among the World's Holy Dead*. [NYC: Henry Holt & Co., 2009] The author explores the place of relics in the landscape of world religions. His quest took him to Padua to see Anthony's tongue; to a forensic lab near Paris to see the blackened rib of Joan of Arc; to a convent outside Jerusalem to see the shattered remains of Elizaveta Romanova, a member of the Russian royal family executed in a mine shaft by Bol'shevik police; to embattled Kashmir to see a whisker of the prophet Muhammed; to a Sri Lankan temple to see a tooth of the Buddha; and to Goa, India, to see the skeletal remains of St. Francis Xavier, several toes of which have been missing since the 16th century, when a pious Portuguese woman bit them off to take home for her own personal devotions.

The book *Rag and Bone* is not so much about the relics as it is about the people around them. People of great faith or of little faith; people credulous or incredulous. It's about the teenaged guide in the Sri Lankan Temple of the Holy Tooth; the faithful monk in Kashmir; the forensic paleopathologist in Paris. It's about how cherished relics of the past can still affect the present.

While many of us might consider the veneration of relics to be a thing of the distant, superstitious past, it is a custom still very much alive. When Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope four years ago, the new Pope Benedict XVI spent time for private devotion with the heart of St. Jean-Baptiste Vianney, who was famous in life for being able to read the hearts of those who came to him for counsel. [R&B, p. 11] In a more secular vein, the remains of Vladimir Lenin have been on display in Red Square since 1924, and the Chinese followed suit with Chairman Mao's Mausoleum. In museums around this country you can find George Washington's hair; Abe Lincoln's bloodied pillowcases; toenails that "might be Elvis Presley's"; and, enshrined in Cooperstown, the bloody sock worn by Curt Schilling in the miraculous World Series of 2004.

But here's an important point: Not all relics are physiological. Some have nothing to do with the body, or parts thereof. Also venerated are objects which belonged to the saintly person, or came in contact with them. Wooden slivers of the "one, true cross;" a martyred saint's necklace; a holy man's walking stick. At the time of the Great Reformation, Calvinist Protestants were disdainful of the Catholic veneration of relics. Yet when I was growing up in New England, it was a relic of Calvinist devotion to which we were expected to pay homage: the Plymouth Rock, upon which the Pilgrims might (or might not) have first set foot in the New World, displayed within its very own Greek Temple on the shore of Plymouth harbor. Here the past heroics of our pilgrim forebears were to be commemorated.

Here, by virtue of this stony relic – authentic or not -- the past was made real to us; the story remembered; thanksgivings offered; inspiration derived.

So what about us, here and now? Has time and sophistication brought us to a new, post-relic age? I suggest that it has not. Here at St. Paul's, the remains of yesterday's faithful are still very much with us. Interred behind the main altar, and in the undercroft beneath the altar, and in the columbarium at the rear of St. Martin's Chapel, are the bone and ash of many of our beloved forebears. The Thirteenth rector of St. Paul's Church, Chave McCracken, and his wife Mary Tyler are here; beloved husbands and wives are here; brothers and sisters are here; children departed too soon are here.

And there are other relics at St. Paul's, not connected to urn or ash. The marble altar in St. Martin's Chapel was brought up from our earlier home at 40th & Euclid, and signals the continuity of our worship with that of those before us and after us. That is a relic. The Resurrection window at the back of the church, given in the wake of a brutal and tragic loss in this parish family, yet signals the hope of eternity to which we are called, and the pastoral community of which we are a part. That is a relic. The framed photograph of Dr. Martin Luther King which hangs in Tucker Hall, taken when Dr. King spoke here at St. Paul's in 1963, signals our heritage of social justice, and the call to heed prophetic voices in our midst. That is a relic.

In every case, these relics remind us that we exist not only in the here and now, but that we are connected by God's grace with the faithful before us, after us, in this place, and in every place where Christ is worshiped and adored.

If you are like me, you have relics like this at home as well. I cherish the old leather case for clerical collars from my Grandfather Thompson, and the mantle clock which marked the minutes and hours of life for my Grandma Thompson. I have, and still wear, some fifty-year old skinny neckties that my Grandfather Gates wore, and treasure the crocheted rag rugs made by my Grandmother Gates. These are the relics which even now connect my life and yours with the lives of those who have inspired us, or supported us; those we have loved and lost – yet, by God's grace, not lost altogether. Relics – whether the tongue of St. Anthony or the necktie of John Gates – serve as touchstones of memory and thus of strength.

What Peter Manseau discovered in his exploration was that the relics, in and of themselves, were not the heart of the matter. Like the Plymouth Rock, even articles of dubious historicity act as a focus for devotion the reality of which is indisputable. Devotion in the heart of the faithful is the crux of the matter. The relics evoke memories worth retaining, sacrifice worth honoring, accomplishments capable of inspiration.

On this Feast of All Saints we remember all the heroes of the faith gone before us – the famous and the anonymous, those we know from the hagiographies, and those we knew in the flesh. Perhaps today you will make note of some small relic, present in this church or in your home, and be inspired anew by the life of faith and devotion of which it is a reminder.

In the course of its history, says Peter Manseau, the religious relic is *no longer referring merely to keepsakes ... of the many prophets the faith had adopted; [rather] it came to indicate any trace of the divine in the world, making every relic a fingerprint left by the creator.* [R&B, p. 218]

Give thanks today for all the saints, for all the faithful departed, and for their mementos which have left traces of the divine in the world, fingerprints left by the creator.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.