

Fourth Sunday after Easter, 29th April

To come across a sundial can be quite exciting (and you don't have to be a child or even a member of the British Sundial Society to get excited about seeing one). They appeal all at once to the artist, scientist and antiquarian within us, and yet they only technically work when there is any sun, for which there is no real guarantee! If you were to walk in the garden at Belmont Abbey, you would probably have the pleasant surprise of encountering a sundial in your path (and hopefully on a sunny day!). Its relatively primitive character, as well as its technical precision and artistry, would of course appeal to your antiquarian, scientific and artistic side, respectively; but its inscription (and indeed there is usually an inscription on sundials) would also appeal to the Latinist (hopefully there might be one, somewhere) within you.

The base of the Belmont sundial is octagonal, with each of its eight sides bearing one of the following words: "*Lux et umbra vicissim sed semper lumen Christi* (Light and shadow alternately but always the light of Christ)". I have tried to find the source of this inscription, but the nearest thing I could find was: "*Lux et umbra vicissim sed semper amor* (Light and shadow alternately but always love)", originally composed for a sundial near Maidenhead. As we know, "love" can be a bit of an ambiguous word; and so "*lumen Christi*" is more specific and also extends the motto from seven to eight words. Both "*lumen Christi*" and the number eight have clear Easter overtones: the former being what the deacon (or priest) exclaims three times as he carries in the Paschal candle at the Easter Vigil; while the latter is the number of new life and resurrection (Sunday being counted as the eighth, as well as the first, day of the week and eight usually being, for that very reason, the number of sides on a baptismal font).

When the light of the sun shines on the sundial the appropriate shadow is duly produced, and yet Christ, the Light, produces no such shadow: "*Lux et umbra vicissim sed semper lumen Christi* (Light and shadow alternately but always the light of Christ)". He is the divine and everlasting Light (*lumen*), as we will sing in the Creed: "born of the Father before all ages. God from God, light from light (*lumen de lumine*)". Today's Epistle, from the apostle St James the Less, talked

about God as “the Father of lights, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration” (Jm 1:17). God the Son is, as we profess to believe, begotten of God the Father, “light from light”, and so in him, in Christ, there is, like the Father, no “shadow of alteration”.

In Christ there is no “shadow of alteration (*vicissitudinis obumbratio*)”. Take that last word and you find within it that Latin expression for “shadow” which we read on the sundial, “*umbra*”: “*obumbratio*”. Likewise, “*vicissitudinis* (alteration)” corresponds with “*vicissim* (alternately)”. Besides, “*umbra*” and “*vicissim*” are also placed side by side on the sundial: *Lux et umbra vicissim sed semper lumen Christi* (Light and **shadow alternately** but always the light of Christ)”. The phenomenon of “shadow” relates to a world of “change”, “of alteration” (Jm 1:17); a world in which natural light, that of the moon and the stars, but mainly that of the sun, takes its part. The supernatural “light of Christ” of course casts no such shadow, for he shines with an otherworldly radiance, an everlasting radiance; for there is “always the light of Christ (*semper lumen Christi*)”.



We have seen how the sundial motto seems to be closely connected with the Epistle, yet there is also something of interest in today's Collect: namely, "*inter mundanas **varietates***" (among **the changing things** of this world). The whole of this Collect is persevered word for word in the Collect for the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (which this year will fall on 26th August, the day on which we will celebrate Mass for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost). The new English translation, which will be used on that day, renders it rather as: "amid **the uncertainties** of this world". It just goes to show that 'variety' (*varietas*) has, indeed appropriately enough, a variety of meanings! *Varietas* in fact can signify: 'difference', 'diversity', 'changeableness', 'fickleness', 'inconstancy' (and therefore 'uncertainty'). The list could go on, though we must also add 'vicissitude'; since this word is derived directly from *vicissim* and *vicissitudo*, which we came across on the sundial and in the Epistle, respectively.

In the Collect, we prayed: "*inter mundanas varietates ibi nostra fixa sint corda, ubi vera sunt gaudia* (among the changing things, or uncertainties, of this world, our hearts may be set where true joys are to be found)". This changing world; light, shadow, light, shadow, may be good for telling the time but it can, however, weary and weigh us down: even the sequence; joy, sorrow, joy, sorrow. We desire, therefore, joys which, on the contrary, are true and unchanging. And so we asked that: "our hearts may be set where true joys are to be found". It may be a joy to encounter a sundial, like the one at Belmont, and yet we look forward to eternity, when hopefully we shall join those, described in the last chapter of the Apocalypse, who "shall not need the light of the lamp, nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall enlighten them, and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Rv 22:5).