

In the House of Kings

Westminster Abbey – to Londoners simply ‘The Abbey’ – is where every king and queen of England has been crowned for almost a thousand years. For more than a dozen it is their final home – Edward the Confessor, England’s only royal saint; Henry III, who began the building of the present abbey in the Confessor’s honour; the formidable first Elizabeth ... Here Diana was memorably mourned. Here her son married his Catherine. If an act of remembrance can be more honoured elsewhere by the fact of its very location I cannot think where that might be.

The Syracuse contingent sits as a block on the south side of the nave. To my left, high up over the Great West Door through which we entered, is a statue of William Pitt the Younger, gesturing enigmatically at posterity – Prime Minister at twenty-four – his promise at least fulfilled, unlike those whose promise we have gathered to recall.

If I look across the nave I can see, suspended from a Gothic column raised when Chaucer was in his prime, the Medal of Honor, awarded to the Unknown Warrior whose grave lies between the two blocks of the congregation. At Arlington his transatlantic comrade-in-arms lies similarly honoured with the Victoria Cross.

To the left of the Medal of Honor, tucked away behind the rows of seating, a TV camera peers discreetly down at the gathering congregation, a reminder that our act of remembrance is the B.B.C.’s top national news story of the day.

The VIPs arrive – the Secretary of State *for* Scotland, the Deputy Prime Minister of Scotland, and, first in precedence for this occasion, the Mayor of Westminster. She sits. We begin. The Order of Service bids “*All stand as the Choir and Clergy move to the Nave Altar*”, then “*The Choir sings*” – an immense understatement. From far off to the right, unseen behind the choir screen, wells up the majestic resonance of the Introit, sung by the Westminster Abbey Special Service Choir. At the end, as they process out before us, I will count just nine robed figures and wonder where all the others went. Surely that thrilling invocation could not have been produced by a choir that didn’t even reach double figures? But it has been – setting a tone of subdued excellence for a hand-crafted occasion, which reconciles solemnity, dignity, sadness and the consolation welling up from a shared and common grief.

The congregation sings the 23rd Psalm to *Crimond*. A Brigadier reads from Isaiah. We stand silent to catch the crashing notes from across Parliament Square, as the Great Clock of the Palace of Westminster chimes the hour. A lone piper plays the traditional lament – *Flowers of the Forest*. The names of the victims – five of them from my own history class – are read over by a rota of voices – four from UK Families Flight 103, the fifth by my Syracuse London colleague, the experienced broadcaster, Christopher Cook.

Candles. Choir. A wreath. Prayer. Reflections. Jim Swire, tightly controlled. My boss, Meredith Hyde, reading the words of my former boss and good friend, Rognvald (‘Roy’) Scott, describing how SU London received the dreadful, unbelievable news. Her careful diction but his words, a terse, tense narration – unmistakably Roy, who has died just two days before we have gathered here; four days since I saw him last. So I remember him, as well as them.

Another reading – from Romans. The Address. An Anthem. Prayers. A Carol. The Blessing. The piper plays *Amazing Grace*. We exit to Bach. I do not see how it could have been done better. I knew perhaps one in a hundred of that congregation but none of us was among strangers.