

Burnham Abbey 18 April 2016

Homily preached by The Revd Prebendary Bill Scott on the 100th anniversary of the first Eucharist celebrated by the Society of Precious Blood at Burnham Abbey and the 750th anniversary of the signing of the Foundation Charter of the original Abbey.

See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them

Not quite a hundred years ago (although it feels like it) but forty five years ago I was Curate-in-Charge of a little mission church in the then notorious Gorbals district of Glasgow. There weren't many Episcopalians in the area and there was a very small regular congregation but we had a lot of visitors. One Sunday a very beautiful young lady appeared at Mass - in jeans and a tee shirt - and disappeared quickly afterwards. The following Sunday she appeared again and I managed to speak to her. "I am an Augustinian Canoness", she told me. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "This area is full of Roman Catholic Churches". "I'm on a social work placement and enjoying the freedom", she said!

Despite already having certain knowledge of the Religious Life, I had never before met an Augustinian Canoness and was quite thrilled. I had no idea, whatever, of course, that in years to come I would be celebrating the founding of an Augustinian house in the South of England and indeed am very pleased to be with you today on these wonderful anniversaries. It is good too to have with us, less informally dressed, I'm pleased to see, Canonesses from the Windersheim Congregation with their connection with Elizabeth Woodford, who had to leave this place when the house was dissolved. We are honoured to have you with us today with your direct connection with pre-reformation Burnham. It is exciting also that Mother Millicent as a child was taken to the Canonesses near Newton Abbot and was moved by their watch before the Blessed Sacrament - seeds being sown for the life at Burnham.

We are reminded in the Mass readings today about the God who dwells among us - who visits our homes.

*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

Also the words to Zacchaeus:

Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.

God's presence has been emphasised and celebrated here at Burnham with the watch before the Blessed Sacrament.

When we think of a Religious House we think of a place where God dwells, even if at times it doesn't really feel like that. There is also present human sin and selfishness and it takes a great deal of courage and conviction to persevere in Community when we sincerely believe that the Lord is with us but deprivations, difficult people and spiritual dark nights are all too prevalent. This house has also seen depravation imposed at the

dissolution. Can you imagine being ousted from your home by a monarch who had his eye on the proceeds?

There is a Norwegian proverb which reads: Heroism consists of hanging on one minute longer.

When I was a child in Junior School one of the stories in our reading book told of a young boy who had fallen through the ice while skating and was left clinging, cold and alone, to the edge of the ice with no help in sight. As he hung on in this seemingly hopeless situation he was tempted many times simply to let go since no one was going to come along to rescue him but he held on, despite all odds. Finally, when everything seemed beyond hope, he clung on one minute longer and after that extra minute help arrived. The story was simple and its moral was obvious: this young boy lived because he had the courage and strength to hang on one minute longer. Rescue comes just after you have given up on it, so extend your courage and wait one minute longer.

This is a tale of physical heroism and it makes its point clearly; heroism often consists in staying the course long enough, of hanging on when it seems hopeless, of suffering cold and loneliness while waiting for a new day.

I can't help but feel it is a story most apposite for the Religious Life today, at least in our part of the world. There are temptations to give up, there is concern about the future and there are the rulers of the darkness of this world and spiritual wickedness in high places which St Paul mentions in the Epistle to the Ephesians .

In the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul ends a long, challenging admonition by stating: You must never grow weary of doing what is right. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul virtually repeats the Norwegian proverb: Let us not become weary of doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

This sounds so simple and yet it cuts to the heart of many of our moral struggles. All of us experience tension in our lives: tension in other people, tension in the church, tension in our communities and tension within our conversations around other people, politics and current events. Being good-hearted people, we carry that tension with patience and respect, graciousness, and forbearance - for a while! Then, at a certain point, we feel ourselves stretched to the limit; we grow weary of doing what is right, feel something snap inside us and hear some inner-voice say: "Enough! I've put up with this too long! I won't tolerate this anymore!". Then we let go, unlike the little boy clinging to the ice and waiting for rescue. We let go of patience, respect, graciousness and forbearance, either by venting and giving back in kind or simply by fleeing the situation with an attitude of good riddance. Either way, we refuse to carry the tension any longer.

However, that exact point, when we have to choose between giving up or holding on, carrying tension or letting it go, is a crucial moral place - one that determines character: big-heartedness, nobility of character, deep maturity and spiritual sanctity often manifest themselves around these questions. How much tension can we carry? How great is our patience and forbearance? How much can we put up with?

Mature Christians put up with a lot of tension in helping to absorb the immaturities and sins of their churches. Men and women are noble of character precisely when they can walk with patience, respect, graciousness and forbearance amid crushing and unfair tensions; when they never grow weary of doing what is right.

Yet all of this will not be easy. It's the way of long loneliness, with many temptations to let go and slip away.

The Gospel points out that, before his conversion, Zacchaeus was a short man, someone lacking in height but that, after his conversion, the tall man gave back what the small man had stolen. Meeting Jesus, it seems, made Zacchaeus grow bigger in stature.

That's what goodness does to us, it makes us grow taller.

Our days are divided up between those moments when we are big-hearted, generous, warm, hospitable, unafraid, wanting to embrace everyone and those moments when we are petty, selfish, over-aware of the unfairness of life, frightened and seeking only to protect ourselves and our own safety and interests. We are both tall and short at the same time and either of these can manifest itself from minute to minute.

Yet, as we all know, we are most truly ourselves when what's tall in us takes over and gives back to the world what the short, petty person wrongly takes. St John of the Cross made this insight the centre-piece of his theology of healing.

We heal not by confronting all of our wounds and selfishness head-on - which would overwhelm us and drown us in discouragement - but by growing to what he calls "our deepest centre". For him, this centre is not first of all some deep place of solitude inside the soul but, rather, the furthest place of growth that we can attain; the optimum of our potential. Thus, if John of the Cross were your spiritual director and you went to him with some moral flaw or character deficiency, his first counsel would be: What are you good at? What have you been blessed with? Where, in your life and work, does God's goodness and beauty most shine through? If you can grow more and more towards that goodness, it will fan into an ever larger flame which eventually will become a fire that cauterises your faults. To walk tall means to walk within our God-given dignity. Nothing else, ultimately, gives us so large an identity. That's useful, too, to remember when we challenge each other: Gospel-challenge doesn't shame us with our pettiness, it invites us to what's already best inside us.

We are here today because Mother Millicent and her disciples have walked tall, have persevered. What will the next hundred years hold for this place? We do not know but we are called to persevere, to continue growing tall like Zacchaeus.