

## **Burnham Abbey 2 July 2016**

**Homily preached by The Very Revd Richard Giles 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.**

*“For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (John 6:55)*

One hundred year ago on 18 April 1916, the Eucharist was first celebrated by the Society of the Precious Blood here in its new home, the Community having moved here from Hendon and, previously, from Birmingham. This journey was not only of miles but of discernment as, under Mother Millicent’s leadership, the Sisters waited patiently upon God and wrestled with their emerging vocation. This journey has been recalled by those of you who have made pilgrimage this week down the Thames to the Abbey gates.

Beginning as an active community serving the slum parish of St Jude, the Community sought to explore a stricter life of prayer, first amidst great hardship and poverty at a location a little distance from the city, then at Hendon and then at last to Burnham. This final move was indeed a spiritual coming home; a restored medieval religious house looking for a Community met a Community looking for a home. Here indeed was a place which spoke to the Sisters, nourished their faith and helped form their common life.

On first seeing the Abbey Mother Millicent famously exclaimed “we came, we saw, it conquered!” and the Society’s Warden, preaching at the Society’s Silver Jubilee, declared that in coming to Burnham “through many desperate happenings we had at last found ourselves as a Contemplative Community”.

Their cup ran over when they found that the original occupants of the house had followed the same Rule of St Augustine as themselves. For nearly 300 years the Abbey had been home to the Canonesses Regular of St Augustine. Moreover, the descendants of that original community, eventually re-established in Devon, centred their life on a ceaseless round of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, a practice gladly embraced by SPB. So the Society of the Precious Blood, on coming to Burnham Abbey, entered into a doubly rich inheritance of place and practice. This year marks also the 750th anniversary of the foundation of the original abbey in 1266. What a glorious ‘apostolic succession’ we celebrate today!

We have so much to thank God for this day in terms of restoration and continuance. We should also give thanks that the Sisters of the restored religious house have been content with a far less colourful lifestyle than their medieval forebears, causing less commotion in the district and fewer problems for their Bishop.

In 1281, for example, the Nuns incurred the displeasure of Archbishop Peckham by refusing to accept a postulant he had sent to them, pleading poverty - in response to which the Archbishop threatened to send them a whole lot more if they didn’t behave themselves! In the 1300s the Abbess had terrible trouble with her neighbours over a boundary dispute; they broke into her houses, wrecked her mill, cut down her hedges, corn and trees and sent cattle to graze on her pasture and Bishop Dalderby needed to order them to stay within their enclosure and ‘to admit no secular person within the cloister door on any excuse’ (seemingly they had taken in boarders to make ends meet) but we are told that ‘it is probable, however, that the Nuns of Burnham paid no more attention to these admonitions than did their Sisters in other houses’. Other signs of worldliness appear in the injunction that the Nuns should not use girdles ornamented with gold

or silver, nor wear any rings other than those signifying their profession. You will be glad to know that the Reverend Mother has assured me that gold and silver girdles have now been discontinued.

In one of those uncanny conjunctions in which fact is stranger than fiction (one thinks of the dropping of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima on the feast of the Transfiguration) yesterday also marked the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest battles of the First World War; 141 days of continual horror. The Sisters of the Precious Blood of Jesus began their life together in this holy place just as the blood of a million men was poured out on the soil of northern France.

Can we even begin to imagine the terror of those young men waiting in their trenches for the artillery bombardment to finish so that they could go over the top to be mown down by machine gun fire? The artillery bombardment, meant to clear their path, had failed; the extensive barbed wire enemy defences were left largely intact, as were their deep trenches. On the first day alone, 19,000 British soldiers lost their lives, with practically no gain of territory.

William Owen described it all too vividly;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est

Pro patria mori.

Just a couple of hundred miles away from these scenes of horror, in the Thames valley countryside, a small group of women, a Sisterhood consecrated to the life of prayer and bearing the name of the Precious Blood of Jesus spilt for us, were in their own way waiting, not in terror but apprehension, to go 'over the top' into a new way of living which had absolutely no meaning without the reality of God.

The terrible thing about society at that time (and nothing much has changed as we seem to learn so little from history) was that the sacrifice of those hundreds of thousands of young men was understood, accepted, nay expected. Any young man seen on the streets of our cities was likely to be given a white feather if suspected of evading active service. The Church blessed the combat and Christian nation went to war against Christian nation each praying to the same God for victory. The innate violence of man trumped all pretence of religious practice.

In contrast, the sacrifice embraced by those first Sisters was not understood or accepted at all. Bishop Perowne of Worcester, in whose diocese Birmingham fell at that time, was extremely suspicious of the Religious Life and it was not until Bishop Gore succeeded him that Mother Millicent was able to adopt a definite and formal Rule of Life. The sacrifice involved in embracing the life of poverty, chastity and obedience, a life of perpetual adoration of God and intercession for our broken world, was deemed questionable and of doubtful value.

The sacrifice of 19,000 young men on 1 July 1916 alone, for the sake of a few yards of barren ground, was on the other hand seen as noble and necessary for the greater good.

Such is the strange contrariness of humankind and it would be remiss of any commentator in the aftermath of our referendum not to note that this contrariness continues in our preference for national and personal interest above the need for a united Europe in the wake of two world wars which together cost 98 million lives.

So what use is it to pray, to hope, to believe? What use is a small band of Sisters in the face of so much darkness in our world, evidenced in the racially motivated attacks on those of different skin colour or religious tradition, the withholding of mercy to refugees and the outcast, the collusion of governments and armaments manufacturers in wreaking ever greater havoc across the world? What use our weekly gathering to make Eucharist? What use goodness, or love?

The only answer is the same answer given by Jesus on a hill outside Jerusalem in about the 33rd year CE. He who spoke of God as no one had spoken ever before, who stopped men and women in their tracks with one look of his eyes, who lived only to show compassion and effect reconciliation and in doing all these things to show us the face of God, was arraigned on trumped-up charges, tortured and executed.

From the beginning the blood shed by this innocent victim held enormous significance for the followers of the Way. It was seen as the symbol of a life poured out for others, a symbol of the kind of life we must learn to live if the world is ever to be transformed and a new creation emerge. For the total surrender of Jesus - like a lamb to the slaughter - to the worst that wickedness could do, was the secret of his power to inspire, to change, to electrify the human spirit. In his defencelessness lay the seeds of his victory; for (as St Paul reminds us) 'power is made perfect in weakness'.

No wonder the young Millicent Taylor - Mother Millicent as she became - chose the Precious Blood as the name of her little Community who wrestled first with deprivation in the slums of Birmingham and then with 'the pestilence that stalks in darkness and the sickness that destroys at noonday' in its heroic life of unbroken prayer. For here was the secret of the hidden life, here alone was hope for those giving up their lives in the mud-filled trenches of France, in the concentration camps of the Holocaust, in the bombed out cities of Syria, for those demonised and abused today in our cities as immigrants or asylum seekers.

Only in our abandonment to the love of God in the pattern of Jesus crucified is there hope of discovering and embracing the power of invincible love. For his blood is true drink, to spend and be spent is the only way to live, fully and completely, the only way to make sense of the waste, the anger, the desolation of humanity left to its own devices.

Reverend Mother and Sisters, we rejoice with you, we salute you! We thank you for showing us the way. 'Amor vincit omnia'; in the end love does indeed conquer all.

"Lift ye then your voices;

Swell the mighty flood;

Louder still and louder,

Praise the precious blood!"