

Llanthony Pilgrimage 2018: Sermon at Evensong

The monks at Pluscarden Abbey in Scotland love to tell the story of one of their brothers who was left to man the front door while the other monks were off in the countryside for a summer's walk day. Some American tourists turned up and asked, 'May we look over the ruins?' The old brother replied – I'm afraid they're all out – it's a walk day!

We love our ruins on these islands of ours – those romantic vestiges of monastic living which somehow still have kept their *Pax* – their monastic peace, centuries after the monks were scattered and the voice of praise fell silent. They are places in which we picnic or make decisions of consequence, where lovers walk or where plans are made. We love our ruins. Of course, there is something about them that challenges, too. We have an old Cistercian ruin near us and from time to time we take friends to see it. English Heritage place story boards there explaining the site – and everything is deep in the past tense. The monks did this, the monks wore that.... Once we arrived to find a boy reading the information very carefully. When he turned around and saw us he said, 'Aren't you meant to be dead?'

Today we gather – and shortly we will pilgrim on to look over the ruins. The ruins are not, of course what they seem, they are not vestiges of the 16th century, but much younger than that – and yet they still attract. Fr Ignatius was not exactly what he seemed – though he seemed to be so many things and yet today he also still fascinates.

My personal first encounter with him was as a teenage novice. Fr Alban Léotaud – the last of the Caldey Benedictines -- loaned me a book from the Prinknash Abbey library. It was *The Rites of Durham* – about the ceremonies and rituals of Durham Cathedral in its monastic days. The copy had belonged to Fr Ignatius and all the most exotic ceremonies had been carefully underlined. This led me to the various biographies, and to the last time I was here as a monk in my early 20s, and then most recently to the excellent book by Hugh Allen which filled many an otherwise tedious hour in Rome during the last Abbots' Congress.

What on earth are we supposed to make of Ignatius of Llanthony? Saint or sinner? Monk or crook? Well, it is not our place to judge, we do not see into the heart. One of my jobs is to carry out occasional inspections of communities, or 'canonical visitations', as we call them. It makes me instinctively assess the health of monasteries and the quality of their abbot. But I am not here as judge today and you are not here as jury! By objective criteria we could judge him harshly. St Benedict in his Rule demands that those who go out and fight at the front must first be long trained in the ranks. No such monastic training or experience for Ignatius! Nor did he feel bound by St Benedict's dictum that monks should not leave the enclosure of the monastery, for it invariably leads to the ruin of their souls. But we also find other objective evidence. St Benedict describes the 'good zeal' that monks ought to have, and we find in him an evangelical spirit and a seemingly boundless optimism in the face of vicissitudes in the life of his community. And we find too a fidelity '*usque ad mortem*', even unto death, a fundamental Benedictine principle. Were I to be charged with a canonical visitation of Llanthony I would probably have found not something I would describe as *the* monastic life, but certainly *a* monastic life. Thomas Merton, the great Trappist spiritual writer,

said that in every man and in every woman there is monk or a nun trying to get out. When this was read in my community one of my old monks wryly commented that in every monastery there is a monk or a nun trying to get out! But Merton is I think right. We long for God: in our common memory we remember that integrity, that interior unity of the Garden of Eden when man walked with God in the cool of the evening.

My mother thinks we monks sit around all day in Gothic cloisters thumbing through illuminated manuscripts in great peace. The Benedictine *Pax* – peace -- is certainly felt by many who visit this shrine. From a distance monasteries always look like places of great peace. One of our German abbots once said that monasteries are places of great peace – unless of course you happen to be a monk! But the *Pax* of the Benedictine motto is not the whole story – it is '*pax inter spinas*' -- peace among thorns. So when a monk reads of the ups and downs, the eccentricity of the Llanthony community, and the vicissitudes of the comings and goings, the hopes and disappointments, the promise and the demise here, the monk sees something of the life of every monastic community, and we all see something of those thorns and thistles that the Book of Genesis tells us surrounded Eden. The thorns and thistles that are a necessary feature of the path that leads to God.

St Thomas à Kempis tells us in *The Imitation of Christ* that those who go on pilgrimage seldom benefit from it. We can all work to prove him wrong today! Ignatius remains something of a signpost. His weaknesses – and his quirky history -- fascinate and make us ask questions. Perhaps we can all make a meditation, give some thought to the monk or nun trying to get out – of us! The thirst for God, perseverance in that search, living with the ups and downs life puts before us in order to see even more the providential hand of God. The word monk comes from *monos*, 'one'. It is an eloquent word, it speaks of solitude and prayer, of integrity – and of being one. We often speak of the unity of Christians – we quote Our Lord himself praying that they might be one and we relate it to ecumenism. Personally, I have always thought it doubtful that Our Lord on the eve of his Passion was somehow thinking of the World Council of Churches! But when you look to the Fathers of the Church you find them seeing this as a prayer for the unity of each Christian – that each of us might be one, men and women of undivided heart.

St Benedict says in the Prologue to his Rule: 'As we run the way of the Lord's commands our hearts expand with the indescribable delight of love.' And for the monk the monastery is the place in which this is lived out. Benedictines have a vow of stability – we vow ourselves to one place for life. Perhaps you should all make a spiritual promise of stability to Llanthony today – make this a place a focus of your spirit journey – a place where God is particularly present to you and always awaits you. We remember in prayer today all who in past generations have called this place home, and we pray also for all those who come here, that when looking over the ruins, they may find peace.

Abbot Cuthbert Brogan OSB