

Message for The Seventh Sunday of Easter 2020

Although we are still celebrating Eastertide and Christ's triumph over death, the readings remind us that the resurrection is not a guarantee of freedom from trouble, or persecution. St Peter writes: 'If you can have some share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad, because you will enjoy a much greater gladness when his glory is revealed'. Perhaps St Philip Howard, our diocesan patron, had those words in mind when he carved into the wall of his room in The Tower *The more affliction we endure for Christ in this world, the more glory we shall obtain with Christ in the next*' But today we need to go back a generation or two from Philip Howard's time, because fifty years or so before he died in the Tower it was occupied by one of our own martyrs, Blessed Margaret Pole, whose Feast Day falls on Thursday this week.

Margaret, sometimes known as 'the martyr of sorrows' certainly knew what it was to live in difficult times, and knew the taste of suffering. Her parents both died when she was very young (her father allegedly drowned in Malmsey wine); a brother died in childhood, she was only married a few years before her husband died, and then when the king turned against her, one son was killed, another narrowly escaped, and her son-in-law was killed. The Psalmist's words about being surrounded by the snares of death must have seemed very lively to her. It must have been very clear to her that as one with some claim to the throne herself, a friend of the now rejected Queen Catherine and her daughter Mary, and one who declined to adopt the King's new religion, her position was far from safe. Henry does not feel secure on his throne; rebellion is in the air; Margaret's son, Cardinal Pole (the man spoken of as the only person who could plausibly have become either King of England or Pope), is speaking out against the king's new religion from his place of safety on the continent; Margaret, an old woman now, is living quietly in Warblington. And then the dreadful day arrives when the knock comes on the door, and she is taken away. Margaret is, at first, brought here to Midhurst where she is kept at Cowdray at the home of the Earl of Southampton. She is questioned here while her home is searched. There is simply nothing to be said against her, no evidence of treachery, no word of criticism. It is true that a tunic is found in her house bearing the five wounds of Christ, and as this image had been used in one of the rebellions against the king this was turned against her, hence the image on our icon, but in fact of course it was just an image of the Lord's wounds: an object of devotion as well as a part of her family's heraldic device. Things did not go well for the people who questioned her. King Henry VIII had once said that there was no holier woman in his kingdom, and so the people sent to trap her into some admission of guilt found her to be. They found her to be 'earnest, vehement and precise' and they could not shake her.

After six months or so at Cowdray Southampton and his wife were finding Margaret a troublesome guest. They could not break her spirit and they longed to be rid of her. Southampton begs that she be taken away: 'I beg you to rid me of her company...she troubles my mind' he writes to Cromwell. You might remember from the Gospels, Pilate's wife dreams, and is troubled by Christ; Herod is troubled by John the Baptist; Southampton is now troubled in his mind,

too. Holiness in another can be discomfoting, upsetting, and troubling, and it was a great relief to Margaret's unwilling hosts when she was taken to the Tower. It never was possible to find anything treasonous in her, but for the security of the king's peace of mind she had to die. He knew her to be a woman of great holiness, but this did not save her. Her execution on May 27th 1541 was brutal, vindictive and deeply unedifying. There was no trial, because there was no offence. There were no words that could be used against her, no actions either that could be used to condemn her. Margaret Pole was killed for who she was, not for what she did or said. She was a Plantagenet, yes; she was a friend of the rejected Queen and her daughter, yes; but above all she was a Catholic, a link to the old religion which, just across the water was not old at all but waiting to be restored. While Henry and his reformers were busy trying to find ways to move people on to their new religion, the last thing that they needed was a woman whose shining and transparent holiness had been fed and nurtured entirely by the old religion. Although she herself lived a quiet life, her cardinal son kept inconveniently reminding the king of what he had done, of the man that he was becoming.

Margaret is killed because of who she is more than what she says or does, and the sight of who she is must have made Henry and his friends uncomfortable. If the old religion can nurture such a faith as this, can it really be so bad? The Gospel reading today reminds us that 'Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. Margaret Pole reminds us that what we do, and what we say, are of secondary importance. What really matter is who we are. It turns out that a long dead royal countess has something very important to tell us. Concentrate above all on the sort of person that you are. What you should do, and what you should say, these are important of course. But most important of all is that you become the person God made you to be. Margaret lived more and more as one who knows intimately the person of Christ, who lived more and more openly in his presence. She invites us to do the same. Here is another job for lockdown living. Who do you dream of being, what kind of person has God created you to become? It is going to be special. Open your life to him; allow him to make it happen within you. Margaret is remembered not for her royal blood, but for her holiness. What does God want you to become? How might you more perfectly project his holiness to the world?