

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty First Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
21st August 2022

Eve of the 450th Anniversary of the martyrdom of Bl Thomas Percy

The Prophet Isaiah, we hear in today's First Reading (which are almost the final words of this Book of The Bible) has a dream. He has a dream of all the nations coming to Jerusalem. They will all discover the glory of God, and as each one discovers it, they will share it with more, until all people flock to Jerusalem. It is a beautiful vision, and one which every generation needs to hear in an increasingly fragmented and broken world. Jerusalem, the City of Peace, would become for the world the fountain of peace. It's a touching vision, one so beautiful that we must never stop believing it is possible, never allow ourselves to believe that it is just an impossible dream.

But history shows us that there are few periods in history where there is anything like real peace, and today I would like to take you back in time, back to a frightening and dangerous era, a period in history which I think few of us would want to visit in a time machine. We are going back exactly 450 years, to visit a man imprisoned in York. He may not yet know it, but this is to be his last day on this earth, and tomorrow he will be beheaded. He comes from an ill-starred family. His uncle, in his youth, had been romantically linked with Anne Boleyn, and it had broken his heart when later he was one of the jury that convicted and condemned her. His father had been implicated in the Pilgrimage of Grace, and had been hung, drawn and quartered under Henry VIII; his uncle (his father's brother) had escaped execution but been first imprisoned, then exiled. After his own execution tomorrow, his title will pass to his brother – but he, too, will be implicated in a Catholic plot and imprisoned in the Tower where he will be found dead – by his own hand or another, no-one knows. And that brother's son, the fifth Percy spread across three generations, will be caught up in the gunpowder plot and imprisoned too. The Percy's were an ill-starred family at this time.

But our man is Thomas Percy, whose execution took place 450 years ago tomorrow, on the Pavement at York. Things had, briefly, looked bright for him in the days of Queen Mary, but when Elizabeth came to the throne his star began to sink, until in 1560 he retired from public life to one of the family's less favoured seats, at Petworth House, and there he lived for some years in relative peace and quiet.

But Thomas Percy, Earl of Northumberland, was one of the leading Catholics of Northern England, and he knew how the people there were suffering under the new religion. Together with the Earl of Westmoreland he hatched a plan to travel to the North and restore the Catholic faith. It was never a good plan. It was ill-thought out, and in truth he never really thought that it would work, but he felt something must be done. So the two earls travelled to Durham, threw out the trappings of Protestant worship, rebuilt the altars and there, in November 1569, Mass was celebrated once again before an enormous congregation. It must have seemed just for a moment as if the bad dream was over and the Mass was back again. But it was short-lived. Royal troops arrived and within a few weeks it was all broken up. Westmoreland fled to the continent, where he lived in exile; Percy fled to Scotland where he hoped to find shelter with friends of Mary Queen of Scots, but he was betrayed, captured and finally sold to the English crown for

£2,000. He is brought to York where he awaits the fate that tomorrow will bring. There was no trial.

Thomas Percy was one of the last of those involved in the rising of the northern earls to meet his fate. Once the rebels had been scattered the retribution was swift and violent. Some 700 men were put to death, without trial, in the bloody reprisals of Queen Elizabeth. At least one man in every village round about where the rebels came from was to be hanged and left on the gallows to rot as a reminder that this regime was serious.

Thomas Percy's final words from the scaffold were:

“From my earliest years I have kept the faith of that Church which, throughout the whole Christian world, is knit and bound together; and in the same faith I am to end this unhappy life”.

Thomas was, by all accounts, a bluff, good-natured man, and a fine soldier. In other days he might have risen to great heights in the kingdom. It used to be that he was dismissed as one more failed revolutionary, unsuccessful in pursuing regime change, but it is very clear that he only became involved in this ill-fated plan because of the suffering he saw among his fellow Catholics, and his actions were, above all else, about freedom to worship as Catholics. They made it clear in the public proclamation at Durham that they meant the Queen no harm, but wanted to restore the old religion and its practices. Even in his last moments on the scaffold he was told that his life would be spared if he would only turn his back on the Catholic faith. His death was not because of the Queen, but because he was, and insisted on remaining, a Catholic.

Those were terrible days, so terrible that it is hard to imagine them. Such cruelty bears a shocking contrast to Isaiah's vision from 2,000+ years before, of the city of peace as the fountain of peace. Thomas, who lived here in this parish and so is, to some extent, 'our' martyr, bears witness to something important, something that matters in any and every generation. He reminds us that there is, within each of us, a quiet place where God dwells, and this is a place that we must keep safe from all invasion, all colonisation. As he lived quietly [here/in Petworth] through the 1560s, his daily devotions were for him the way in which this place was reinforced and made stronger. Whatever demands others might legitimately make on him, no earthly power could claim the right to invade and colonise that place. This is a place that we all need to visit and reinforce. Neither threat nor promise can be enough to make it worth surrendering. If the attacks on it we experience are more subtle and the claims to invade it are more peaceful, they are still as dangerous. This is the place within where each of us stands before God, and so it is the place where each of us is most truly ourselves. It was to protect this place, not just for himself but for all those who laboured under tyranny that Thomas stood on that scaffold, looked at the sharpened blade head on and said 'No, this fortress you shall not take'.