

Mass in the Abbey Church of Kirkstall
With the parishioners of Our Lady of Kirkstall, Leeds
Sunday, 10 July 2011
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
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Bishop of Leeds

On 9 July 1950 – which, back then, was also the feast of SS John Fisher and Thomas More - close on 60,000 Catholics from the then 17 parishes of Leeds, and some other towns in the diocese, came here to the Abbey of Kirkstall on pilgrimage. It was Holy Year. The procession was accompanied by brass bands and the people, marching four abreast, formed a procession, which leaving the Town Hall, was a three- miles-long chain. They were blessed with good weather and by the presence of the Lord Mayor, and it was against the back-drop of the Abbey that, at an altar which was specially built for the occasion, they had Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The Bishop of Leeds, John Henry Poskitt, had died in the February of that year and the impressive procession and devotions were led by Monsignor John Dinn, the Vicar Capitular, whose memory may well still be recalled by some of you here today.

Again, on 17 May 1952, following the appointment of a new shepherd for the diocese, Bishop John Carmel Heenan led a procession of 5,000 Catholics, along that same rout, and was joined by a further 15,000 Catholics to attend a High Mass, sung by the Abbot and Cistercian Monks of Mount Saint Bernard's Abbey in Leicestershire, once again at an altar in these Abbey grounds. It was to mark the eighth centenary of the founding of this great Abbey by the Cistercians in 1152. It is with a certain amount of pride that I note that among the first few Abbots of Kirkstall there was a Roche!

Today, thanks once again to the Civic Authorities of Leeds, we make history, for this is the first time that the Sacrifice of the Mass has been celebrated within the walls of this Abbey Church since its dissolution when, on 22 November 1539, the Abbey passed into the hands of King Henry VIII, via his commissioner Richard Leyton. It was a sad day for Abbot John Ripley, the twenty-seventh Abbot of Kirkstall who, together with his monks was evicted from these buildings. You may be interested to know that there were more monasteries per square mile in Yorkshire, before the Reformation, than in any other part of Christendom. As Cardinal Heenan noted in 1952, '[The King] enriched himself and made Yorkshire and England the poorer'. The ruins around us speak eloquently of that demise as well as the more tragic denial of the Mass and the Sacraments to the people who had earlier risen in protest, together with Robert Aske, Lord Darcy and Nicholas Tempest, to plead for the restoration of the ancient faith at the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536.

It was a tragic day in more ways than one, for the monks had supplied for centuries the only social and health care services to the surrounding communities which, overnight ceased and, as a result, the level of poverty and disease rose exponentially. The Cistercians were skilled craftsmen, producing leather goods, pottery, leadwork for plumbing, cloth and metalwork amongst other things. Indeed, Kirkstall Forge is a reminder to us of this. It has been said that the dissolution of the

monasteries prevented what was rapidly becoming the first industrial revolution in our land, so skilled were the monastic foundries.

In the years following the closure, the lead roofs, windows and furnishings were removed and, to prevent the monks from returning, the main road into Leeds was diverted through the nave of this Abbey church and the great East window. A route that was later abandoned during the Victorian restoration of the Abbey church. The buildings were stripped but not demolished and the Abbey served as a quarry for local building-works as well as housing for cattle and eventually became overrun with vegetation.

As I stand here today, as I have before, here as well as in the ruins of other Yorkshire monasteries, I have wondered at the sheer selfishness and hatred that led to this ruination and of how in every age since attempts have been made to choke the voice of Christ – not only the voice of Christ as proclaimed by the Church, as important as that is, but the pernicious destruction of the voice of Christ in people's souls and in their consciences. For God's voice is the voice that challenges a person not only from without, but also from deep within. As Our Lord said, quoting the Prophet Isaiah today: *They will listen and listen again, but not understand; see and see again, but not perceive. For the heart of this nation has grown coarse, their ears are dull of hearing, and they have shut their eyes for fear they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and be converted and be healed by me.*

The world, our world, is transformed only by holiness of life – a life whose heart is aligned to the mind and the heart of Christ; striving and persevering in the ways of the Lord until our final breath. This is what this Abbey stood for and what the life of this monastery was all about.

In our gospel today, the incarnate voice of Jesus was heard by the crowd from over the waters as he began to preach. The same voice of which Psalm 28 speaks – a psalm that was sung every week by the monks in this Abbey for 387 years: *The Lord's voice resounding on the waters .. the voice of the Lord, full of power, the voice of the Lord, full of splendour. The Lord's voice shattering the cedars .. [and making] Lebanon leap like a calf and Sirion like a young wild-ox .. The Lord's voice shaking the wilderness .. rending the oak tree and stripping the forest bare.*(Psalm 28)

In the parable of the sower, the voice of Jesus, over the waters, invites us to a radical conversion of heart, to take stock and examine today where the seed of his life-giving word has landed in our hearts and in our lives and where it has not. For this conversion, which is brought about by a power far greater than the uprooting of rocks, mountains and trees, or the dissolution of monasteries - for our hearts can also be the microcosms where the malignant forests of lust and avarice can luxuriate, where colossal mountains of pride and envy can tower brazenly and selfishly over others, where the oaks of self-righteousness and the tigers of anger and hatred can roar and thrash about bringing ruin.

It is into that territory where Jesus walks today by his word, summed up in the gospel as the heart which has grown coarse and the ears that are dull and the eyes that are shut. In other words, the whole person. And to the stormy landscape and the fierce

beasts that he finds within us, he brings the sweet sounding music of the Father's love and grace and forgiveness which brings a growth of a hundredfold, of sixtyfold and thirtyfold if we allow the seed to take hold. For as St Paul says in our second reading: for even *creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God.*

This is our vocation: to be holy; to become saints; to be living edifices of God's grandeur and power, his greatness and goodness amidst all creation. Your special model and patron, of course, is Our Lady of Kirkstall which is a new title, for this Abbey was known as Mount Saint Mary because, as Cardinal Heenan reminded those present in 1952: " Saint Bernard [the founder of the Cistercians and] the last of the Fathers of the Church, set the Mother of God high upon the mount of piety which he raised to the glory of God in the stones of his Abbey churches and the inspired prayers and words of his writings".

Our Blessed Lady, above all, gave home and nurture to the Word of the Lord as, as we are told in the Gospel, *she pondered all these things in her heart.* She allowed the word of God to form her, to give shape to her life and to give it direction, for which she was hailed by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council as the archetypal image of what the Church should be in all its perfection. We are called by her Son to be her children and, with her Son, to be co-heirs with Christ to the Kingdom.

Today, we gather not as numerous as the 60 or 20 thousand Catholics from the 1950s - for the ravages of these latter years have altered the focus and attention of many from the voice of Christ - but, nonetheless, we gather, as did the monks before us, as the faithful remnant of those who still profess the ancient faith, and now under the patronage of this great woman, the Lord's first disciple who was so loved by the monks in this place, to bear witness to her Son. It is to all of us, but not least of all to all of you who are now under this special patronage, that what lay at the heart of this impressive heritage has now come. And there is nothing that will speak more volubly or more strikingly to the world in which we live than the beauty of the lives of those whose hearts have not grown coarse, whose ears have not become dull and whose eyes are not shut to the reality of Christ, the word of life, the sower and the seed of faith. Amen.