

Pluscarden Abbey: Homilies

Homily for the Funeral of Fr. Camillus

5 September 2009

“Happy the gentle: they shall have the earth for their heritage” (Mt 5:5). It’s the Jerusalem Bible version of: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

It’s already a tribute to Fr Camillus that a Gospel saying springs so immediately to mind, is so immediately appropriate. And that it should be a Beatitude.

“Blessed are the meek. Happy the gentle”. The Greek word is *praüs*. It means gentle, meek, mild, or, if we are thinking of a condition rather than character, powerless. It denotes those who don’t take the path of anger, renounce violence, and put their trust in God. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus shines forth as the icon of gentleness. Like Moses before him, he bows the neck of his soul and body, calls himself “gentle and lowly in heart” (11:29), doesn’t cry out in the streets or break the bruised reed (cf. 12:19-20), and, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, enters Jerusalem “gentle, and mounted on an ass” (21:5). Fr. Camillus was a gentle man, a true gentleman, and this gentleness was something more, we feel, than simply a natural trait or personal chemistry. It was something he learned from Christ, something he drank from the Chalice. It seemed very right that he should die on St. Aidan’s day, 31 August. Not only was St. Aidan associated with the north-east of England from which Fr. Camillus came, but he was sent there from Iona precisely because of his gentleness. He was, says St. Bede, “*summae mansuetudinis...virum*” (H.E. III, 3), “a man of the utmost gentleness”.

In losing Fr. Camillus, Pluscarden has lost its oldest monk. We lose a monastic contemporary of Abbot Alfred. We lose someone who kept with him to the end something of that spirit of Prinknash in the 1950s, an echo of the days of Abbot Wilfrid Upson, the re-founder of Pluscarden. We lose someone who, in his gentle, unobtrusive way, has been at the heart of Pluscarden ever since he came here in 1954, at the age of 29. We lose something of ourselves.

It is worth recalling his journey here. Peter Warner was born in York in 1924, baptised and brought up as a Catholic, educated at the famous Bar convent in York and then, as one of only 3 lay boarders among 200 seminarians, at St. Cuthbert’s College, Ushaw. He left school in 1942 and volunteered for service in the R. A. F. The years of training as a navigator took him all over Britain, to Canada, and finally, after the end of the War, to the Frisian island of Sylt just off Denmark. He was demobbed in 1947. Returning to civilian life, he remarked, “proved less complicated than being numbered 1589764 in 1943.” He was attracted to a medical career, advised against studying for a medical degree, opted for chiropody, and began his training at the London Foot Hospital. Hitherto he had been only an intermittently practising Catholic, but lodging by chance with a Catholic family in South London, he began to realise what he was missing. His road to Damascus was on board a London bus. “An egocentric and self-indulgent 25 year old, he wrote, suddenly became aware that his fellow passengers were not a group of anonymous, unlovable strangers, but were individuals for whom I was now [feeling a love] as I had never loved anyone before. Moreover, I knew that, although I was the conduit for such love, it emanated from some other source. During the remainder of 1949 and into the Holy Year of 1950, the gift of understanding grew.” And the desire to be a monk came to him. He said to me only a few weeks ago: “my vocation came to me quite out of the blue. I didn’t know what to do with it. I was terrified.” He went on with his studies, but was looking around. He applied to the Passionists, but was turned down. He then went to Mount Saint Bernard, was deeply attracted, but felt the austerities of the Trappist life were beyond him. A guest suggested Ampleforth. So, in September 1950, he found himself one of ten postulants there. When, a week later, they were all clothed as novices, he was the last in line. Ten monastic names had been set out for them to choose from. Being the last, he had no choice, and found himself called Guy. The novice master later took pity, and by his own choice Br. Guy became Br. Camillus, soldier turned servant of the sick, and patron saint of hospitals and the ill. After six months at Ampleforth, where he’s still fondly remembered by his contemporaries, he realised a more contemplative form of the monastic life suited him better, and went to Prinknash. It was Easter 1951. He had to begin as a postulant again, one of his fellows being a transfer from the Capuchins, Fr. Alfred Spencer. When he was clothed - by no less than the then Abbot

President who happened to be visiting - he was, amid confusion, called Ambrose. A day later, he received Camillus back! On 29 September 1952, he made profession as a monk of Prinknash. In 1954, he was sent to Pluscarden to study philosophy under Dom Bruno Webb. Later that year he was offered the choice of staying there or returning to Prinknash. We all know what his choice was. He chose Pluscarden, he later said, because he had felt physically much better here, but "more importantly...it was the attractiveness of Pluscarden that won me over." I wonder if it ever occurred to him how much and for how many he himself would become part of that attractiveness. "Happy the gentle; they shall have the earth for their heritage."

And so, apart from further studies at Ramsgate and occasional returns to Prinknash (as for his ordination as a priest in 1960), he remained here. He was never a strong man physically, and "felt" - shall we say - his various physical weaknesses. He once described himself as "stubbornly weak". But I remember when I came here in 1974 just how much he was carrying. He was Subprior, guestmaster for both guesthouses, shopkeeper, infirmarian, master of ceremonies, stipendiary, chapter clerk, responsible for the Pluscarden Kalendar of Everlasting Remembrance (a job, involving daily labour, which he kept to the very end). He also wrote up the Community's Annals, and was, I think, Archivist too. All this in addition to the regular round of liturgy, preaching, hearing confessions, of serving and reading in the refectory, washing up and sometimes cooking supper. Not bad for a "weak" man! Dom Camillus was not a mover and a shaker; precisely because he didn't go in for anger, either overt or covert, he was often ridden over by stronger characters. There was no backlash if you ignored him. But in the midst of that, of all this service, of his own limits, the lamp of the beatitude - "Happy the gentle" - shone steadily out. There was a quiet radiance, and a radiation. It was especially as guestmaster that he shone. For how many people was he not the face of Pluscarden? For how many did he not embody the attractiveness of Pluscarden? And more, of the Gospel, of Christ. He was often the first person they met, a personification of kindness and gentleness, consistently and unobtrusively there, a comforter, a sustainer, a guide, someone actually quite ardent and apostolic in his Catholic faith, but never aggressive, simple and open-hearted about the things of God. Right up to the end, he could surprise one with his sudden enthusiasms and insights. Right up to the end, he was supporting other people.

And so to the last years and months. As I say, he always felt his own physical afflictions (and let others know he felt them!), but always there was the gift of God within him, that gift that had come to him in his baptism and again on the bus and in his monastic vocation and in his priesthood. And it shone out. About two years ago, at Mass - the Gospel had been that of the raising of Lazarus - I noticed after Communion a tear on his face. I thought it was pain, and I asked him about that afterwards. No, he said, it was that Gospel and the memory of someone's anniversary. "Love can be so heavy sometimes," he said. I think I can say I have never known a monk who became so preoccupied with the thought of heaven as he did. "I never thought it was so hard to break into heaven," he said to one of the brethren recently. And again, "We are always told we go to the Father through Christ. Now I just say, 'Father, I love you.'" He was longing to go. I was privileged to receive, a few weeks ago, perhaps the most touching testimony of all. "You know, he said, our Lord is closer to me now than at any time in my life. It's not sensational, I just feel him all the time. I can't describe it" "Happy the gentle; they shall have the earth for their heritage." In a comment on that beatitude, St Hilary of Poitiers wrote: "Because through the gentleness of our spirit Christ lives in us, we shall also be clothed by the radiance of his glorified body." "Through the gentleness of our spirit Christ lives in us." Fr. Camillus experienced that. On his desk, the Monday before last, the day he was taken into hospital after a cerebral haemorrhage, lay an unfinished letter. It said, "It would be presumptuous to ask our Saviour to change our life." But he went on - and these were his last written words - "Enough is enough". The Lord agreed. The Lord's mother too, whose Assumption had just been celebrated.

In his final week, cared for most competently and respectfully in Dr Gray's, with St. Camillus, we might think, involved as well, visited by brethren and friends, he was silent, largely unconscious or asleep, but when awake smiling in recognition of his visitors. And he died, absolved and anointed, late on St. Aidan's day, "a man of the utmost gentleness."

Today - following the pattern of the Eucharistic Prayer - we do three things. First, we remember Dom Camillus, and we do so with great love. Then, we give thanks for his life and service, this witness to the Beatitude of gentleness. And thirdly we pray for him. We pray for him as we prayed for him receiving his body yesterday: "May he gaze with the angels on the Beauty of God. May he share the vision of those who contemplate God, face to face. May he share the hearing of those who

listen to the music of heaven.” We pray that this gentle man who spent so many years “receiving” others here - suscipiens - may himself be received - susceptus - by the gentle Lord he loved. We pray that that other beatitude will also be fulfilled in him: “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Fr. Hugh, O. S. B.