

## HOMILY FOR BEAUVALE PILGRIMAGE MASS 2017

It's not for nothing that each year the Beauvale Society seek permission from the owners of this site, currently Ann and Tony Whyte, so as to ensure that we can gather here in this place, so close to the location of the original main altar of Beauvale Priory, to celebrate this Mass in honour of the Beauvale Martyrs, St John Houghton and St Robert Lawrence.

They were both, as you know, Priors of this Priory, founded in 1343 by Nicholas de Cantilupe, one of nine Priors to be built in England dedicated to the Carthusian Order of Monks who lived and worshipped God here at Beauvale for some two hundred years until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. John Houghton was Prior here in 1531 for only a short time, because later that year he was elected Prior of the London Charterhouse, and his successor was Robert Lawrence, who continued as Prior here until 1535. That year, these two, along with Augustine Webster, Prior of Axholme in Lincolnshire, travelled to meet Thomas Cromwell to plead for a dispensation, for themselves and their monks, from the new Oath of Supremacy which, as you know, recognised King Henry VIII as head of the Church in England. But in fact Cromwell had them arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London. When they refused to take this Oath, they were, at Tyburn on 4 May 1535, first hanged, and then, while still alive, they were savagely drawn and quartered, so making John Houghton and Robert Lawrence the first Carthusian Martyrs in England.

It is therefore so helpful and instructive that we can still gather here in this place where both silence and prayer sustained their simple lives of faithfulness to God. It is estimated that there would have been no more than 12 cells for the monks of this Priory, each of which would have contained only a narrow bed, with a mattress of chaff or straw, a prayer kneeler, a table and a chair. They would have spent several hours a day alone in their cells in silent prayer and study, some time at manual labour to sustain the Priory and its land, a little time to eat, and the rest would be taken up in communal worship. Whatever we might think of their daily life, it was without doubt their simple lives of faithfulness to God here in this place, expressed in silence and in prayer, that sustained St John Houghton and Robert Lawrence during their imprisonment in the Tower of London, and which ultimately gave them the courage to face their martyrdom, for love of God and the Catholic Church.

So what can we, in our own time, learn from them, from the role of silence and prayer in their daily lives here in this holy place?

The Psalmist reminds us of the importance of Silence; in Psalm 40 we are challenged to 'Be still and know that I am God'. Here, in this place, the monks would have practised being silent, which is not easy, because our hearts and minds are often so restless. And this restlessness is nothing new. Let me share with you this story from long ago, from the wisdom of the Desert Fathers:

'There were three friends who were not afraid of hard work. The first decided that he would serve God by trying to be a peacemaker, by trying to reconcile those who were fighting each other. The second decided that he would serve God by visiting and caring for the sick. The third went off to live in prayer and stillness in the desert. The first, in spite of all his efforts, struggled to be effective as a peacemaker, because new arguments continued to break out. In his sorrow he went to visit his friend who was serving the sick, but he found him also disheartened because he too was struggling. So together they went to visit their friend who was living in the stillness of prayer, and told him their difficulties and asked his advice. After some silence he poured some water into a bowl and said to them, 'Look at the water', and it was disturbed. After a little while more, he said to them, 'look now at how the water is'. They looked into the water, and this time they saw their own faces reflected in it, as in a mirror. Then he said to them, 'It is the same for those who live among people, disturbances prevent them from seeing their own faults. But when a person is still, then they see their failings, and can learn from this.'

Silence was so important in this place, in the lives of St John Houghton and St Robert Lawrence, and it is so important in our own time, in our own lives.

Much too can and has been said about prayer, but the great teacher of prayer is of course Jesus himself. In trying to explain his love for his disciples, his love for all his followers, for you and for me, he said this, 'as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you'. We are to Jesus, more precious than we can ever fully understand. In his life on earth Jesus knew what it was to be the object of his Father's love, and he knew what it was to want to spend time in that love. So there was nothing that Jesus would not do for love of the Father, even to the point of being prepared to lay down his life on the cross. Why? Because he knew that the Father loved him, and that the Father had nothing but his best interests at heart. There is trust and mutual love between the Father and the Son. I want to believe that it was their discipline of regular prayer here in this Priory, of opening their hearts in stillness to God's love, that enabled John Houghton and Robert Lawrence to put their trust in Jesus as their Risen Lord and Saviour, and to courageously stand up for their faith through their

imprisonment and martyrdom. It was their relationship with Jesus in prayer over the years here in this Priory of Beauvale that enabled them to believe just how precious they were to God and that, in spite of their own natural fears at facing such a brutal death by being hung, drawn and quartered, Jesus would sustain them and give them the courage they needed, and that they would share in his eternal life and love.

This belief that Jesus wants his followers to share in his own deep personal relationship with his Heavenly Father has been true of all the martyrs of England and Wales, and this is what the lives and witness of Sts John Houghton and Robert Lawrence teach us today. Only in prayer can we begin to glimpse just how precious we each are in the sight of God our Father, who looks upon us with love as his beloved sons and daughters in Christ Jesus. Only in prayer can we also begin to discover more clearly what God asks of each of us, in our time; that we bear witness in our lives, in our words and in our actions, to His love, so that, through us, others may come to experience the love that God has for them also. We today may not be called to be martyrs in the sense that John Houghton and Robert Lawrence were, but we are all called, without exception, to bear witness in our daily lives to God's wonderful love, to be martyrs, witnesses in that sense. So, here in this holy place, let us ask the Risen Lord to teach us to appreciate more and more the essential place of both silence and prayer in our restless and busy lives.

St John Houghton, pray for us.

St Robert Lawrence, pray for us.

All martyrs of England & Wales, pray for us.

So prayer is actually the process of letting the Lord Jesus draw us into that love between his Father and himself. Prayer then is not so much what we do, but rather how much we allow the Lord to work within us. As we begin to let our defences down and allow the Lord into our hearts, so we begin to be more aware of his tenderness, understanding and compassion, so we begin to open our entire being to his love. So while, today, we do not live our daily lives as did John Houghton and Robert Lawrence here in Beauvale Priory with so much of it given over to both silent and communal prayer, we do have to recognise the importance of silence and of prayer in the busyness of our lives, and that prayer cannot simply be a part of our living, something to tick off on our daily list of things to do. Because prayer, as we glimpse in the lives of these two martyrs, cannot just be concerned with the saying of prayers or with an understanding of prayer as something that is preoccupied with what we do, but rather that prayer is first and foremost about letting God be God in all aspects of our lives, convincing us of how greatly we are each loved by God. So that there is nothing that we wouldn't do for love of God, even to laying down our lives in imitation of Jesus.