

FROM ONE TO ONE
Tyburn Convent
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Sunday January 24th 2016
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In the summer of 1969, I drove Brother Harold Palmer, then a friar of the Anglican Franciscans - the Society of St. Francis, to the abandoned hill sheep farm at Shepherd's Law, north west of Alnwick in Northumberland. The only object we took with us was a proper surveyor's tape measure. Out of the four sites which Harold visited throughout England, it was Shepherd's Law he finally chose to establish a contemplative hermitage, but a hermitage with more than a touch of the Carthusian life about it; that is, he envisaged three or four others joining him but living a largely solitary life. This year the stunning Romanesque-style chapel which he has built there, jointly won the RIBA/ACE five-yearly prize for the best piece of religious architecture in Britain.

But it's not architecture or buildings which set me off at Shepherd's Law this afternoon. Instead, it's the life and intention of that holy hill (for it's built on a hillside) which takes me there today. Often people forget that Francis of Assisi embraced the contemplative life alongside the active life he encouraged in his friars. The Apennines in Italy are peppered with Franciscan hermitages, including the two most famous hideaways at La Verna and the Carceri at Assisi. This was, effectively, Harold's starting point, alongside the example of the early twentieth century Anglican religious, Father William of Glasshampton. The hermitage dedicated to our Lady and St. Cuthbert now has perhaps a rather more Benedictine feel to it.

At the heart of the hermitage's life is prayer and silence, alongside a rich plainsong tradition and a developed pattern of the offices. However, from the beginning, the ecumenical vocation was also central. Some twenty years ago now, Harold himself embraced Roman Catholicism. The hermitage remains in the ultimate care of the Society of Francis and the life of prayer there is profoundly ecumenical rooted in much Anglican material. On my last visit there, Harold was out at a doctor's appointment and I was greeted by an *Orthodox* priest. On other occasions, *Methodists* and *United Reformed* laity and clergy have been staying there. The trustees are mainly Anglican, but there is both a Roman Catholic and a Presbyterian lay person amongst them.

In a way, the religious life, is the obvious starting point for ecumenical reflection and endeavour in England. Why so? Well, the wellspring behind both parts of the sixth and seventh centuries re-evangelisation of these island sprang from religious roots. It was Pope Gregory the Great, a Benedictine monk who would send one of his community, Augustine, to the court of the Kentish King Ethelbert, in the late sixth century. As we know Augustine was a reluctant pilgrim to these northern parts. Preferring what he believed was a richer culture and certainly warmer weather, he almost gave up on his journey at Autun in south east France. But Gregory's mind was made up and Augustine was persuaded to continue.

Interestingly enough, as we read in Bede's remarkable *Ecclesiastical History of England*, Gregory was a generous and theologically subtle inspirer of mission. Augustine and his cohorts were not to demolish pagan temples, but gently and carefully bring them into the Kingdom of Christ. Gregory's vision was one of an overarching Christian integrity which would take seriously the variety of cultures which his missionaries would encounter. This left a lasting legacy in western Europe. Gallican, Milanese and English Christianity, for example, each had its own individuality but within a wider unity of confession.

The Irish tradition coming down via Columba, and thence to Aidan in Northumbria was equally a mission fired by religious. The great Synod of Whitby which

facilitated the confluence of the Irish and Roman missions was hosted by the redoubtable Abbess Hilda. She and King Oswy were able to temper even the acerbic and forceful Wilfrid to bring about a unity which honoured and acknowledged both traditions and which would lead to the individuality and generosity of *Ecclesia Anglicana*, as it became known.

On most occasions now, when an Archbishop of Canterbury meets with the Holy Father in Rome the liturgy begins at the ancient monastery of St. Gregory the Great on the Caelian Hill. Almost always now other traditions will be there too, Methodists, Waldensians, Orthodox and Presbyterians. The monastery is now presided over by an Australian abbot who is clear that he is both an Anglican and a Roman Catholic priest. As an individual he is himself an icon of ecumenism.

Just beneath the monastery and also on the Caelian Hill, another religious house snuggles into the hillside. It is a house inhabited by the Missionary Sisters of Charity, set up by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The sisters there – rather as in the case of the Anglican friars and sisters of the Society and Community of St. Francis – are equally dedicated to the Whole Church of God, but this time with a passionate and unblunted concern for the poor, for the peace of the world and for social justice. The fullness of the Gospel is mirrored in these two very different outflowings, which Harold still shares in his lonely hillside location.

This beautiful church and monastery, here in the very heart of London, offer a bitter-sweet but very focused location for our prayers in this week of prayer, pioneered by the Abbé Couturier early in the twentieth century. Tyburn, as a place, was symbolic of the negative passions which denied the unity for which Christ himself prayed. On both sides of the Reformation-divide tragic mistakes were made. Amongst other things this convent is a sign of penitence amongst all Christians for past sufferings, but, also, most positively for us to acclaim together the words of our reading:

‘Blessed be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’

Amen

Reading

I. Peter. 1 3-5.