

Sermon for

Solemn Evensong and Commemoration of the Carthusian Martyrs St. John Houghton and Companions

Wednesday 4 May 2011

The Chapel, Sutton's Hospital in Charterhouse.

Shortly, from this chapel, where we have celebrated such a beautiful solemn evensong, we will process to the Chapel Court, the site of the ancient Priory Church. There, as the Master will remind us, the Carthusian Community – having a few days earlier undertaken their reconciliation with God and one another - offered the Mass of the Holy Spirit.

They did so that the “gracious Comforter himself” would “console, strengthen and direct [their] hearts”. And, as we will hear, during that holy Mass the monks experienced the voice of a gentle breeze, which, though no more than a sweetly whispered murmur, was nevertheless an irresistible power.

It is so fitting that we are reminded of that outpouring of the Holy Spirit during this season of Eastertide. For Our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection is also the time of the new coming of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised in the Upper Room where he kept his Passover with the Twelve. Jesus, the Christ, consecrated by the Father with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, gave up his spirit on the cross so that risen he may bestow it upon his Apostles. “Receive the Holy Spirit”, he says. Then, just as he himself was sent, so he calls the Apostles to be ministers of, and witnesses to, that peace and reconciliation which are the fruits of the new creation inaugurated by his death and resurrection. This apostolic mission is given its definitive manifestation on the day of Pentecost. Full of the strength of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles go out to fulfil faithfully their vocation, even though in so doing they encountered suffering and death.

That same Holy Spirit came upon the Carthusian martyrs whom we commemorate today. The gift of the Holy Spirit moved them to be reconciled with God and with one another. That soft murmur carried sweetly and strongly, to their inner ear, the very word of God: “Fear not: for I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name; you are mine”; I will be with you through river and fire to bring you to the glory for which I have created you. Yes, a gentle breath convincing them utterly that the fiery trial ahead would make them nothing less than partakers in Christ's sufferings - thus something in which to rejoice! And it was “the spirit of glory and of God” resting upon them which enabled this brave brotherhood to believe unswervingly that “when [Christ's] glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.” The sound from Heaven heard just after the consecration of the Mass was indeed the promise of future glory: a sure hope on which to draw during their courageous witness to the truth of God and His holy Church.

That courageous witness was given four hundred and seventy six years ago today when Saint John Houghton, after pardoning his executioner with a moving embrace and kiss, went to his death praying one of the psalms we sang tonight: *In te, Domine, speravi*. It was such hope, born of the Spirit, such a firm trust in God our strong rock and deliverer, which preserved St John in fidelity to his calling and mission; such inspired trust and hope permitting St John in his suffering to give voice to the very passion of Christ: "Into your hands I commend my spirit". In this, too, he was one with Christ's Passover into the Father's glory.

His nineteen companions gave the same witness, some of whom endured being tied to posts in filthy prisons and deprived of food. However, for a while at least, a Margaret Clement, disguised as a milkmaid, it is said, was able to smuggle in meat to these poor souls. Margaret had been brought up in the household of St. Thomas More, whom by association we may also include as a Charterhouse martyr. No doubt you know that as a young man he joined in the spiritual exercises of the Charterhouse and seriously considered joining the Community. Although he did not, the influence of the monks remained in his heart. In his *Dialogue of Comfort*, written whilst a prisoner in the Tower, he tells us that imprisonment for God's sake is no displeasure. As an example to prove this he takes the "Holy Monks...of the Charterhouse Order, such as never pass their cells but only to the church set fast by their cells and thence to their cells again, wherein for God's love they joyfully choose so to live." And it was in his cell that St. Thomas echoes the trust of the Carthusian when he wrote: "God must be your comfort...And he is a sure comforter;...and therefore if, you be part of His flock, and believe His promise, how can you be comfortless in any tribulation? When Christ and his Holy Spirit, and with them their inseparable Father (if you put full trust and confidence in them), be never neither one finger breadth of space nor one minute of time from you."

Guided by the Holy Spirit, St Thomas More discerned that his vocation was not monasticism but marriage. Of course, one can be called to both (but not at the same time!) as was demonstrated by one of the Carthusian Martyrs, Blessed Sebastian Newdigate. He married and had a daughter. Later, following the death of his wife, he entered the London Charterhouse. King Henry VIII, with whom Sebastian had enjoyed an intimate friendship, offered great riches to Sebastian if only he would conform to the Act of Supremacy. The king even visited Sebastian in prison in order to convince him to do so. However, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Sebastian remained steadfast.

This fidelity of two Charterhouse martyrs who had lived as married men brings to mind the most recent marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. For it powerfully reminded us that Holy Matrimony calls the couple to be living witnesses to the Holy Spirit – The Lovers' breath. The Spirit inflames the trust so essential to married life, trust not only between husband and wife but also – and above all - in God. As Bishop Richard Chartres in his eloquent address explained: in the spirit of our generous God, husband and wife are to give themselves to one another; that whatever the difficulties, they are to be committed to the way of self-sacrificing love, a generous love which allows the Spirit to flow. Yet such generous love, the true sustenance of enduring happiness, is not possible without that most fundamental trust in God. I think that the young Duke and

Duchess do believe this. In the lovely prayer which they composed for their own wedding they asked God the Father to keep their eyes fixed on what is real and important in life, and they asked the grace of serving 'in the Spirit of Jesus' himself.

The Spirit of Jesus Christ was at work not only in that happy couple, but also in the gathering together of so many who shared in the splendid royal wedding. Assembled with Her Majesty the Queen were three cardinals, the Apostolic Nuncio representing the Holy See, and the present Archbishop of Westminster too! It was an occasion which showed that, even if not wholly, the Holy Spirit of peace and reconciliation has healed many wounds in the Church. Certainly there is a journey still to be completed, but how far we have come from the situation in the sixteenth century which we recall today!

Furthermore, it struck me, sat as I was in the choir stalls with the Chief Rabbi and leaders of other religions as neighbours, that within the Abbey a certain bond of unity with those outside the Christian family had been forged. Was this not another manifestation of the Holy Spirit's work?

Certainly the royal wedding made a very favourable impression on many of my brother bishops from around the world who were at another great celebration which I attended last Sunday, the Beatification of Pope John Paul II. This too was a marvellous celebration of the fruits of the Spirit, for the Holy Spirit empowered Blessed John Paul to respond whole-heartedly to the invitation of Christ: "Do not be afraid." He was not afraid to forgive his would-be assassin. He was not afraid to proclaim the power of hope in Christ or to cross the threshold of that hope in search of freedom for so many. As Pope Benedict said in his homily, Pope John Paul encouraged many believers not to be afraid to speak the Gospel. Maybe it was during the closing days of his earthly life, when he could hardly speak, that Blessed John Paul spoke most authentically the Gospel of God's love and unfailing mercy. Fortified by the Holy Spirit received through the Sacrament of Holy Anointing, in the midst of fragility of old age and the suffering caused by sickness, when fear can so easily overwhelm us, he witnessed to the abiding presence of God. To the end Blessed John Paul II taught us not to be afraid of accepting the call to holiness: for if we rely on the Holy Spirit's strength, no matter our weakness in face of challenges, we will be victorious and find peace in that glory for which we were made.

Blessed John Paul II speaks to us still this evening. He assures us that no matter the obstacles still to be overcome, the Holy Spirit is leading the Church to the full realization of the Father's plan. That plan, to which the will of Christ is perfectly conformed, is expressed with heartfelt urgency in his prayer uttered at the moment he entered the saving mystery of his Passover: *Ut Unum Sint*. In his encyclical on the commitment to ecumenism rooted in this prayer of Our Lord, Pope John Paul II wrote that Church "asks the Spirit for the grace to strengthen her own unity and to make it grow in full communion with other Christians; a grace to be obtained through hope in the Spirit, who can banish from us the painful memories of our separation and grant us the clear sightedness, strength and courage to take what steps are necessary, that our commitment may be ever more authentic." (102)

So as we take our steps to the Chapel Court in the company of Saint John Houghton and his fellow Carthusian Martyrs, let us seek their intercession - and Blessed John Paul II's too. He would also ask to seek the help of that spirit-filled woman, Mary, who recognised that for God nothing is impossible. In answer to their prayers, may the grace of spiritual unction which they possessed so abundantly pass to us and softly charm our hearts. Gladdened and strengthened by that gift may we not be afraid to journey further along the path toward unity, knowing that the Lord walks with us every step of the way, no matter how arduous it may seem. May God's holy will, that there be full and visible communion among all who rejoice in the name Christian, find fulfilment in and through us, to his eternal praise. Amen.

Most Reverend Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster