

St. John of Bridlington 2015

Mark 10: 17 – 31

Today we celebrate St. John of Bridlington. It's the nearest Sunday to his Saint's Day, which falls on the 10th October – well, there's some ambiguity about that because of the change in the calendar (is it the 10th or is it the 21st October) and every year someone turns up around the 21st and asks whether we're doing something to celebrate his feast. Anyway, we keep his Saint's Day on the 10th October and we celebrate it today.

So let's just recap who St. John of Bridlington was, because he wasn't just some obscure local saint. It may be that few people outside the Priory have ever heard of him today. But in the 1400s he had an international reputation as one of the most important English Saints. His shrine, in a chapel beyond the High Altar in a part of the church now demolished – and so now exposed in the churchyard, where we shall

process and say prayers as this service concludes – that shrine was a pilgrimage destination for pilgrims from all over the world, including royalty: King Henry IV, V and VI all came here.

John was born in Thwing, about 9 miles inland, on the Wolds, in 1320. He became a Canon here, in this monastery, in 1340. He became the Cellarer, supervising the Monastery's estates and granges. He later became the sub-Priory but was too humble to accept election as Prior in 1356. However, he did allow himself to be elected Prior, the head of the monastery, in 1362 up to his death in 1379.

John always remained humble. Although he would use the Prior's lodgings, just the other side of that wall, for official purposes, he didn't sleep in the chamber there. He slept in an ordinary, monastic cell in the dormitory, at the other side of the cloisters to the church, going away over where the allotments are, on the line of the back wall of the Rectory garden. He

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wore ordinary, woollen clothes, rather than furs. He exercised debt relief, remitting the rents of poor tenants, feeding and clothing the poor, and allowing poor scholars – this was a very academic monastery – to live here for free. He was wise in his spiritual counsel and God used him in a remarkable healing ministry. Various miracles were attributed to him.

Humble in life, Prior John became exalted in death. He was made a saint in 1401, the last Englishman to be canonised before the Reformation. He was taken up as the patron saint of the royal house of Lancaster. The cult of St. John of Bridlington became massive. The monastery became wealthy as people *came* here on pilgrimage; and John's reputation *went* far and wide. There was a Mass of St. John of Bridlington. Parts of his legend were woven into the universal text of the Mass. And it was set to music. There's a CD of a reconstruction of the Mass. We don't have it in the gift shop, because it's not on the label we sell. But it's available on the Hyperion label; and it's called "Music

for Henry V and the Royal House of Lancaster." Fragments of this Mass have been found in countries across Europe. Such is the significance of St. John of Bridlington. And such is our heritage.

Now this heritage operates at different levels. At one level it is just fascinating. It means this building has the same sort of appeal as a stately home or a castle where some great statesman once lived. If you're of a historic bent, it's a bit mind-blowing to think that Henry V has been in the building that we're now in. He walked through the cloisters, just out there. He probably came in through that door from the cloisters (or perhaps one at the other end of the cloisters that now leads into the flower arrangers' cupboard.) But just imagine him coming in, there; walking down that aisle; crossing the transept as the great central tower soars above his head; going down aisle at the side of the quire and entering the chapel behind the High Altar. Imagine King Henry V kneeling there, by the shrine of St. John, and giving thanks to God for victory

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at the Battle of Agincourt through the intercessions of St. John of Bridlington. I find it spine-tingling!

But. But this heritage operates at a different level as well: a much, much, much more important level. It is our spiritual heritage and it informs our vocation. Each one of us here today has a vocation; God has a purpose set aside for each one of us. Our response to God's call to be disciples of Jesus is to commit our lives to serve him; and to devote ourselves to working out what that vocation is and how we can fulfil it in our lives. It involves total commitment: Jesus told the man he met in this morning's Gospel reading, who wanted to follow him, to sell everything and give it all away to the poor; to let go totally. Rather like the way St. John devoted himself totally to being the Cellarer and Prior of this monastery, living humbly and meeting others' needs before his own.

Each of us has a vocation. It may be in some form of accredited church ministry. There might be a future

Licensed Reader, or Priest, or Bishop sitting in our midst this morning. It may be that God is calling you to be the Priory's next churchwarden, or treasurer, or prayer-shawl-knitter, or visitor, or grass cutter. It may be that there's no churchy element about your vocation at all. Vocation is about being fully the person God wants us to be in the context in which he has set us. It's about how and where we earn our living; about how we discharge our family responsibilities; about the commitments we make in the wider community; about the connections we make in our leisure time; and about how we exercise our consumerist power as we spend our money.

But as well as each having our own vocations, the Priory has a corporate vocation to which we all contribute in some way or another. Over 475 years after the monastery was closed down, its church is still called to be a place of worship, of learning and of hospitality. Remembering St. John of Bridlington recalls us to that vocation. Amen.