

Dear Parishioners,

It's funny the things you don't remember from your childhood, and the things you do. Like walking along the street holding my Mum's hand one day and suddenly saying, 'Mum, do you know where I'd love to live?' 'Where?' 'England.' How was she going to break it to me? There was only one way. 'Ian, this IS England.' Imagine my disappointment. To me England was the Merrie England I'd read about in story books, the technicolour world of Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland. I had a very happy childhood. Even so, through the 'window' of my balaclava, Chorley in the first half of the nineteen sixties looked more 'Whistle Down The Wind' than 'The Adventures of Robin Hood.' Perhaps I had taken my first reluctant step towards growing up.

This week we celebrate the feast of our parish patron, St William. William Fitzherbert was Canon and Treasurer of York Minster. His life was caught up in the power struggles in the English Court and the Papal Curia. He was elected Archbishop of York in 1141 but his election was disputed by the Cistercians of Fountains Abbey and their rival candidate, Abbot Henry Murdac. Some say William was intent on reforming the spiritual life of clergy and people and that the Cistercians wanted to preserve the status quo. Anyway, they accused him of corruption. After an appeal to the Pope he was consecrated Archbishop and for a while ruled his diocese conscientiously.

But the rivalries rumbled on. A new Pope, Eugenius III (a Cistercian...) suspended William from the exercise of his office and, after his relatives attacked Fountains Abbey, he was deposed by the Council of Rheims. He lived a life of prayer and austerity at Winchester until the death of the Pope, when he was restored as Archbishop. The people of York thronged the streets to welcome him home but in the crush a bridge collapsed and many people fell into the River Ouse. It was said that not a soul drowned, thanks to the prayers of the holy Bishop. Sadly the time of William's triumph was not to last long. He died one month later, probably of poison.

So there you have it. Not a lot to set the heart racing or, at first sight, to inspire. Jealousies, rivalry, politics in Church and State. It's quite hard for the staff at St William's Primary School to uncover for the children a portrait of St William that is attractive. Still harder to draw out from the story lessons for them to imitate. I sympathise with them.

Our problem is that we want the saints to have lived in Merrie England, in a beautiful technicolour world. But they didn't. The world looked much the same to them as it does to us. Human nature is just the same. Just as sinful. Just as petty and cruel. Our own time seems to have problems and challenges that are unique but really they are age-old ones repackaged. How do you live a Christian life in a world that opposes you? How do you hold on to your ideals when even good colleagues tell you, 'Don't take it so seriously'? How do you preserve your integrity when you're surrounded by insincerity and politicking? How can you become a saint when you know you are a sinner underneath? St William is a saint for our time and for the real world.

Maybe every generation thinks the world has gone to the dogs. Is it something that comes with age? We think the world must be about to end soon because things couldn't possibly get much worse. Are we living in the end times? I don't know.

In the Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien, Frodo and the other members of 'The Fellowship of the Ring' face many challenges, battles and set-backs in their journey towards

Mordor. When things are at their lowest ebb, this exchange takes place:

'I wish it need not have happened in my time' said Frodo. 'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'

St Paul says: 'Try to discover what the Lord wants of you, having nothing to do with the futile works of darkness but exposing them by contrast... So be very careful about the sorts of lives you lead, like intelligent and not like senseless people. This may be a wicked age, but your lives should redeem the times.' (Ephesians 5:11,15-16)

So be of good heart! Challenging days may indeed be ahead us, as they were for St William. But so also is the promise of Grace.

God bless you.

Father O'Shea