

Dear Parishioners,

‘Why would you give your life to something from a book?’ It was the end of a class in a High School. I’d been talking to the pupils about the priesthood and now it was question time. We’d almost finished when this question came from one of the boys. It wasn’t at all a cheeky question. It was prompted by genuine puzzlement and I knew what he meant. If the story of Jesus was just that, a story invented for the purposes of the Gospels, who would be stupid enough to stake his life on it?

But St Luke insists that the events about which he is writing really happened, in a definite place and at a certain time: ‘In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar’s reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas...’ This was no fairy story.

What can we do about Catholic children thinking that the Gospel stories are just edifying fables? I think the answer is to teach them the basics of Church History because the history of the Church is the continuation of the Gospel Story down through the centuries. I am a bit biased. As a child I went to St Gregory’s Primary School in Chorley and St Augustine’s was the local boys’ High School. We were taught from an early age how Jesus made St Peter the first Pope, that St Gregory was one of his successors and that he sent St Augustine to make England Catholic.

We understood how WE had ended up being Catholics. We were part of a real story that went back to the real events of the Gospel. It’s so important for children to know that. Can you imagine a Russian Christian or someone from Poland not knowing how their country became Christian? If you’re a parent trying to think of things for the children to do while the schools are closed, why not help them to find out how the Faith came to Wigan and how it was preserved during times of persecution?

Early teenage years of course weren’t all school. Very often on Saturday afternoons I’d go with friends to Chorley Swimming Baths and afterwards to Annie Massa’s Ice Cream Parlour for an ice cream and a cup of Horlicks. (If you haven’t had Horlicks made in a proper Horlicks maker, you’ve never lived.) At the back of the shop are several streets. In the early 1600s it was a warren of weavers’ cottages and in one of them lived Roger Wrenno.

Roger had been baptised in Chorley’s Parish Church but he was a secret Catholic and gave shelter to a priest, Father John Thules. They were both arrested and sent to Lancaster for trial. Actually they escaped from Lancaster Castle but in the night they went round in a circle and ended up where they started. They were rearrested and condemned to death.

On the day of execution Roger had first to watch the hanging, drawing and quartering of Father Thules. He himself was to suffer the lesser punishment of death by hanging. But when he was turned off the ladder the rope round his neck broke and he landed on his feet, fully conscious. He was offered another opportunity to renounce his faith but he refused and mounted the ladder once again. ‘If you had seen that which I have just now seen’ he said ‘you would be as much in haste to die as I now am.’ He was martyred on 18th March 1616 and declared ‘Blessed’ by St John Paul II on 22nd November 1987. Many towns have one martyr. Some have two. Chorley has one martyr who was hanged twice.

I will be eternally grateful to the teachers who taught us Roger's story. Taught us that God did become man in Palestine. That his saints did walk along the shores of Galilee, among the monuments of Rome, along the lanes of Canterbury. And in the streets behind Annie Massa's Ice Cream Parlour.

God bless you,

Father O'Shea