

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday (B)

26<sup>th</sup> August 2018

‘Staying true to Jesus’

Josh 24: *We have no intention of deserting the Lord our God*

Ps 33: *Taste and see that the Lord is good*

Eph 5: *Husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the Church*

Jn 6: 60–69: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life*

Some 20 of us went, the other day, to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of the martyrs at Tyburn. Just near Marble Arch once stood ‘the King’s Gallows’ where, over the course of 6 centuries, maybe 50,000 were executed for felonies. Of these, 105 were Catholic martyrs, put to death (1535–1681) simply for the crime of being, and practising as, Catholics. The site of the gallows, known colloquially as the ‘Tyburn Tree,’ is marked in the pavement by a large round plaque, though perhaps few notice it as they scamper across the traffic island crossing the roads. Along the road from there is a convent of Benedictine sisters, the ‘Tyburn nuns,’ who keep the memory of the martyrs alive, welcoming pilgrims to the shrine and exercising a life of perpetual prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, night and day.

It seems to me a beautiful and powerful combination of the Tyburn sisters’ lives that they provide a permanent witness to the martyrs as well as a perpetual adoration of

Jesus in the Blessed Eucharist, because in many respects it was for and about the Mass that many of our martyrs died — at Tyburn and elsewhere. Of course the beginnings of the persecution of faithful Catholics began with ‘the King’s great matter’ — Henry VIII’s intended divorce from the Queen — and thence with his usurpation of the governance of the Church, creating himself as ‘head of the Church in England.’ But as time went by the focus of the great persecution of Catholics became the celebration of the Mass: hence the arrest not only of seminary priests (like St Ralph Sherwin) and Jesuit missionaries (like St Edmund Campion), but also of those laymen and women who safely lodged priests in their homes or allowed the Mass to be celebrated in their properties (like St Anne Lyne), and of those who even rescued priests from prison so they could keep ministering the sacraments to the faithful (like St Margaret Ward).

Our Lord says to the Apostles in today’s final passage from Jn 6, “What about you, do you want to go away too?” He says this after many others have stopped following Him when they have heard His teaching on the Eucharist, “eat My Body ... drink My Blood.” Our Blessed Lord didn’t

choose to re-word that teaching, or row back on it, or diminish the strength of it. He let those go who did not have the faith to accept it; and He poignantly asks the Apostles if they wish also go and not accept the wonderful truth of the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. But they reply — in the person of St Peter — that they will not go away ... To whom would they go? They will accept this novel and awesome teaching on receiving His Body & Blood because it is He who says it, He who is “the Holy One of God”: they will not leave Him.

In many ways, this is exactly what the martyrs did. They were hugely challenged by the questions of the day — questions that meant life and death — but they chose to love the Mass, stay faithful to Our Lord in the difficulties, and risk their lives. They saw many countless countrymen walk away from the true faith, accept the awful changes wreaked on the country’s 1000yr-old Catholic church, and see the diminution of belief in the Holy Eucharist. Countless of our people, under violent threats from the state, walked away ... but the martyrs, brave countrymen and women of ours, did

not. When they reflected on that question, “What about you? ... Will you go away too?” they chose not to walk away, but to stand firm, ... or, if anything, to draw closer.

Our Lord’s Eucharistic teaching in Jn 6 that we have heard proclaimed over these past few Sundays is the key to what made the martyrs stand firm: “It’s the Mass that matters,” was the motto of those times. And their conviction — their devotion to Our Blessed Lord, truly offering Himself, His Sacrifice and His very Being, in the Mass — was the heart of their standing firm to the end and to the giving up of their lives. These men and women, a century and a half of martyrs, are Catholics whose lives we should emulate. They loved the Mass; they protected and helped priests to offer it, so that when finally the ferocity of the 300yrs of penal times was relaxed, there was still a continuity of Catholic practice for us to inherit. On the back of their courageous faith do we still stand. Let us truly love the Mass as they did, and worship the living Jesus in this most sacred Sacrament that He has given us. *O Sacrament most Holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise... etc.*