

HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL OF FR AIDAN GILMAN, OSB

20 DECEMBER 2018

On behalf of Fr Abbot and of the monastic community I would like to welcome you all to this funeral Mass for Fr Aidan. I would like to welcome family members who knew him as Dick, and who have been able to be present at rather short notice and I welcome friends, of whom I know he had a great number over the years. He was a dearly loved and highly valued friend, spiritual director, adviser. We pray for him in this Mass, for the forgiveness of his sins and for his welcome into the Kingdom of Heaven. These are the prayers we all need; to offer them for Aidan is a duty, but also a privilege and a joy.

Fr Aidan made a careful selection of the two readings we have just heard from the book of Genesis and from the Gospel of St Luke, the Emmaus story. I think the first thing we might notice is that they are both short and I think that this is part of the deliberate plan. I am not just referring to physical height – his, mine or anyone else's – but brevity. I suspect Fr Aidan did not want long readings or even more to the point a long homily; I shall try to heed the warning. Many of us were summoned to Fr Aidan's room in recent months and days, usually for a very specific purpose and then there would be some such quite speedy closure – certainly and very sympathetically in my case – 'you can go now' sometimes with a wave of the hand 'you are very busy'.

Brevity is, however, I realize only part of the point; the readings may be brief but they are telling. First there is the creation of mankind, male and female, in the image and likeness of God. This seems appropriate for Fr Aidan, because he was grounded in his humanity, no gnostic ignoring of the body and the physical in the interests of an ethereal spirituality.

Then there is the Resurrection, again something physical and bodily, but now transformed; an astonishing, fleeting moment of recognition. The disciples recognize the risen Jesus at the breaking of the bread, but he has vanished in that very moment from their sight, leaving them with their hearts burning within them. It is the moment of salvation and the re-creation of mankind, of physical humanity restored, albeit in a way that is not yet securely grasped but which points beyond itself to what is still to be.

There could be a great deal of biographical detail and much anecdote, but the funeral homily is not the place for this. I just want rather to point out, and see if I can draw some meaning, from the obvious and intriguing point that Fr Aidan's monastic career, which spanned 70 years, went down some routes that were very traditional in the Ampleforth community and some that were very definitely not traditional. Yet it was the same Aidan taking both routes, a man made in the image and likeness of God and seeking through his monastic call to catch a glimpse of the face of the risen Christ.

On the traditional side, there is studying Biology and general science at Oxford to equip him for teaching in the school. He was housemaster of St Thomas' for five years and later novice master, albeit just for a year and chaplain of Stanbrook Abbey for five years. He was part of the pastoral centre at St Bede's in York and then four years in the priory and parish in Osmotherley. These are traditional works, but no doubt – and there are those here who know better than me – not necessarily worked conventionally. I have little doubt that he did a good deal of important pastoral work in his time at Osmotherley, but the comment he makes in *italic* on his monastic CV is that he planted a garden there as he had done previously in Stanbrook and indeed, he points out, more than a dozen gardens in total in assorted places.

This is my way of turning to the untraditional Aidan, because of course as we all know he will be remembered among us and widely beyond Ampleforth, as the postbag has shown in the last few days, as a hermit. He spent six years on the moors from 1969, occupying and repairing a derelict cottage and building a small chapel. Then interspersed with the other roles I have mentioned, he spent a year in Nigeria, including a trek to the place where Charles de Foucault had lived; this was the basis of one of the 'shaggy dog stories' to which he could be partial with the moral 'man proposes but God disposes' – he was in fact due to the exigencies of travel only able to spend twenty minutes there not the planned week. He was part of an experimental community (his own words) in Little Crosby and then closer to home and more age suitable, in Plantation House in the valley, twelve years there in total. Before thinking however of that as a half way compromise with civilization and amenity we may remember that he used to refer to Plantation House as the hutch.

There are maybe just two comments to make about the hermit years. Before he joined the monastery he was three years (immediately after the war) in the Royal Marines and there is maybe a connection here. To be a marine and to be a hermit requires an exceptional sinewy toughness of body, mind and spirit, which is not a

common still less a universal gift. Then for those who think that being a hermit is an antisocial turning away from human fellowship and friendship, then one simply has to say that for Aidan, as for many another hermit in the history of the Church, friendships and ministries were opened up and entwined through the eremitic experience. He was also thereby enabled to walk alongside and support brethren in very difficult circumstances.

He had an eye for the odd connection, for paradox, for the coincidence that points towards a providence. I remember him preaching once on the feast of St Dominic when the reading was by coincidence the Canaanite woman who Our Lord compares to the house dogs; Fr Aidan found a twinkle in the eye connection between the house dogs and the 'domini canes' the Dominican self-description as 'God's dogs'.

On the day he died the first reading at Mass was from the book of Ecclesiasticus which has the final line 'Happy shall they be who see you and those who have fallen asleep in love'. Sister Philippa remembers that Fr Aidan preached on that text once at Stanbrook and remembered that it used to be on memorial cards. Eyes seeing God and love, ways in which Aidan will be remembered.

A few years ago, but when he was already in the infirmary, I asked Fr Aidan, as many before me, about prayer. He responded that we approach God through the incarnation. He comes to us and that monastic life is God's love affair with us. He recalled Abbot Herbert Byrne's comment that contemplative prayer lasts only a few moments. Then he became autobiographical and he spoke to me of three moments. Of knowing for a moment in boyhood that God loved him. Of choosing in early manhood monastic life and not marriage and then of being a hermit, not so much times of prayer but as living with God. Finally – and this story he also shared with the brethren last August in our celebration of his two jubilee celebrations of this year, 70 years a monk and 60 years a priest, he recalled a photograph of his parents, his father's hand upon his mother's shoulder and in that picture he saw a couple grown together in love, one being. In the end of our lives, at the end we pray of a long monastic life, we find and remember what has been there from the beginning, God's love, and we pray that he takes us to himself.

Fr Gabriel Everitt, OSB

Prior Administrator

