

Stat Crux Dum Volvitur Orbis

On Tuesday, 4th May 2010, The Archbishop of Canterbury preached a sermon to commemorate the Carthusian Martyrs at an *ecumenical service which was held at Charterhouse, London, to commemorate the 475th Anniversary of the Martyrdom of St John Houghton and his companions.*



This is how Wikipedia tells their story:

Saint John Houghton (c. 1486- 4 May 1535) was an English Catholic martyr.

Born around 1486, he was, according to one of his fellow Carthusians, educated at Cambridge, but cannot be identified among surviving records. Similarly, no certain records can be found of his ordination. He joined the London Charterhouse in 1515, progressed to be Sacristan in 1523, and procurator in 1526. In 1531, he became abbot of the Charterhouse of Beauvale in Nottinghamshire. However, in November of that year, he was elected Prior of the London house, to which he returned.

In 1534, he asked that he and his house be exempted from the oaths required under the new Act of Succession, which resulted in both him and his procurator being arrested and taken to the Tower of London. However, by the end of May, they had been persuaded that the oath was consistent with their Catholicism, with the clause "as far as the law of Christ allows" and they returned to the Charterhouse, where (in the presence of a large armed force) the whole community made the required professions.

However, in 1535, the community was called upon to make the new oath as prescribed by the 1534 Act of Supremacy, which recognised Henry as the head of the Church in England. Again, Houghton, this time accompanied by the heads of the other two English Carthusian houses (Robert Lawrence, prior of Beauvale, and Augustine Webster, prior of Axholme), pleaded for an exemption, but were this time arrested by Thomas Cromwell. They were called before a special commission in April 1534, and sentenced to death, along with Richard Reynolds, a monk from Syon Abbey. Houghton, along with the other two Carthusians, Dr Reynolds, and John Hale, vicar of Isleworth, was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn on May 4, 1535. The three priors were taken to Tyburn in their habits and were not previously degraded from the priesthood and religious state as was the custom of the day.

From his prison cell in the Tower, Thomas More saw the three Carthusian priors drawn to Tyburn on hurdles and exclaimed to his daughter Meg: "Look, Meg," he said, "these blessed Fathers be now as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage!" John Houghton was the first to be executed. After he was hung, he was taken down alive, and the process of quartering him began. Catholic tradition relates that as Houghton was about to be quartered, as the executioner tore open his chest to remove his heart he prayed, "O Jesu, what wouldst thou do with my heart?" A painting of the Carthusian Protomartyr by Zurbaran depicts him with his heart in his hand and a noose around his neck. In the Chapter House of the Carthusian Priory of Parkminster in England, there is a painting depicting the martyrdom of the three priors. After his death, his body was chopped to pieces and hung in different parts of London. He was canonized on 25 October 1970.



painting by Zurbaran 1598-1664

The painting depicts St. Thomas Houghton with a noose round his neck and his heart in his hand.

The full text of the Archbishop's sermon is below...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Stat crux dum volvitur orbis: 'The cross stands while the world turns' - The motto of the Carthusian Order, familiar to many people in this Chapel this evening, and a phrase which has many levels of meaning, many levels which, as we reflect on the meanings of martyrdom, we may begin to penetrate more deeply.

The cross stands while the world turns. So long as the world turns the cross is there. In the words of Pascal "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world, we must not sleep during that time." As long as the world is there, there is suffering, there is injustice, there is butchery. The horrors inflicted on John Houghton and the martyrs of this house are horrors that human sin makes possible in every age, past, present and to come. And faced with that awareness that Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world, it is a very strong spirit that is not at some level alarmed, even cowed.

In one of the great historical novels of the twentieth century, Hilda Prescott's 'The Man on a Donkey' we follow the events around the Pilgrimage of Grace, events around the time, of course, of the martyrdoms we commemorate today. And towards the end of that extraordinary novel, we watch and listen to Robert Aske, the leader of the Pilgrimage of Grace, in his last anguished moments, hanging in chains from the Keep of the Castle in York: "God did not now nor would in any furthest future prevail. Once he had come and died. If he came again, again he would die, and again and so forever, by his own will, rendered powerless against the free and evil wills of men. Then Aske met the full assault of darkness without reprieve or hoped for light, for God ultimately vanquished was no God at all. But yet, though God was not God, as the head of the dung worm turns, so his spirit turned blindly, gropingly, hopelessly loyal, towards that good, that holy, that merciful - which though not God, though vanquished - was still the last dear love of a vanquished and tortured man." The cross stands while the world turns. If Christ came again so would his cross. Because that evil, that passionate commitment as it so often seems, to destroy and undermine the good, is written into the experience of fallen humanity. There is no shortcut, there is no happy ending, in any ordinary sense. The dying martyr in that passage can only turn to what he does not know; and what he does not know is very distant from, and very different from, the God who is a God of happy endings and solutions. But the cross that stands while the world turns is the cross of God: and so we are taken to a second level, where we realise what it is that is being transacted in the cross of Christ, and what it is that is transacted in every moment of reckless, generous, terrible suffering for the sake of God's truth. Aske turns to what is still 'the last dear love of a vanquished and tortured man'. In darkness and in torture, men and women throughout the centuries have turned to the crucified Christ; they have addressed the crucified Christ with the last calling of their lips and the last movement of their hearts, as did John Houghton. They know that whatever else may disappear, there is something on which they may call - and it is Christ crucified.

The God who has, it seems, been vanquished, is yet a God who cannot be abolished. In many ages and many places, authorities even more appalling than Henry VIII have believed that they could abolish God and the cross of God; and they have had to discover that while they may vanquish, they cannot destroy. That which is the last hope, the last longing of the condemned and tortured, remains. The cross stands while the world turns. And whatever human power and human injustice can achieve and effect, the hanged God, the failed God, remains a sign forever.

The cross stands while the world turns: the sign of our terrible *human* failure, the sign that God is not to be abolished, that justice cannot be extinguished forever; that the voice of the poor and the lost and the tormented cannot finally be silenced - not by any power that the universe can show, because it is rooted in what does not change. The cross stands and the world turns. The world changes, the world comes and goes - powers rise and fall, fashions come and go - sometimes the Christian faith looks attractive and fashionable in the world, and sometimes it looks stupid and marginal. And *always* it is what it is because the cross stands.

The Christian who knows his or her business is the Christian who has the freedom to return again and again into that silent unchanging presence - the hanged God, whose love, whose generosity, springs out of depths we can never imagine. It is the sounding of those depths that is the heart of the contemplative life - that life lived in such an exemplary way by the Carthusians then and now, lived by so many others in our world over the centuries, lived, we hope and pray, for many centuries and millennia to come.

We treasure with perhaps a particular intensity the martyrdom of the contemplative, because the contemplative who knows how to enter into the silence and stillness of things is, above all, the one who knows how to resist to resist fashion and power, to stand *in God* while the world turns. In that discovery of stillness lies all our hope of reconciliation, the reconciliation of which John Houghton spoke in this place, this place where we are met to worship, before the community gave its answer to the King's agents. A reconciliation of which he spoke (as do so many martyrs) on the scaffold, a reconciliation which is not vanquished, defeated, or rendered meaningless by any level of suffering or death. If Henry VIII is saved (an open question perhaps) it will be at the prayers of John Houghton. If any persecutor is saved it is at the prayers of their victim. If *humanity* is saved, it is by the grace of the cross of Jesus Christ and all those martyrs who have followed in his path.

Robert Aske hangs in chains still, but (as Hilda Prescott's novel portrays it) a discovery has been made as he falls from level to level of despair and desire 'For now, yet with no greater fissure between then and now, and as a man's eyes are aware where no star was of the first star of night, now he was aware of One, vanquished God, Saviour who could as little save others as himself. But now, beside him and beyond, was nothing - and he was silence and light.'

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.



The badge of the Carthusian Order