



Saints – Old and New

Hugh of Lincoln

22 November 2015

The Venerable Peter Townley, Archdeacon of Pontefract

Matthew 9: 9–13 extract from *Vita Sancti Hugonis* by *Gerald of Wales*

I bring you the greetings of the Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales and thank you sincerely for your support and care for those Parishes in the Diocese of which this noble College is the Patron.

For five years from 1983 I was the Priest-in-Charge of the Conventional District of St Hugh, Holts Estate in Oldham. It was a sink council estate and, as an indicator of the deprivation in the area, in the five years we were there I buried nine children. We didn't have a church building as such but met in the junior assembly hall of the church Primary School. Each Saturday evening we would put the chairs out and draw back the screen of our dedicated sanctuary. One of the great treasures in this otherwise utilitarian hall was a piece of ancient stone from Lincoln Cathedral. For the people in the congregation and the children in the school it was their connection not only with the past and something beyond themselves but also particularly with their Patron Saint.

I felt 'linked into [this] network of eternal life' (to use Seamus Heaney's phrase) in Westminster Abbey on the Feast of St Matthew in 2011. The occasion was the consecration of the present Bishop of Lincoln. On that date and in that place, exactly 825 years before, Hugh had been consecrated as Bishop of the same vast Diocese. Hugh came to the Diocese as a Carthusian monk. His spirituality and life as a contemplative had been formed at their house, the Grande Chartreuse, in Southern France. If ever you get the opportunity to see the film *Into Great Silence*, do so. Filmed in that isolated alpine retreat, it gives a sense of the austerity, the silence, solitude and rhythm which provided a framework for Hugh's life.

A life of prayer for Hugh was no escape. To be a contemplative is to be subversive, to be on the edge. In the words of Mother Mary Clare, late of the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres in Oxford: 'We are called to stand. Wherever we may be, as fortresses in the darkness, in the night of the church as we know it and as it has for centuries been known. To stand in the day of martyrdom, whether of blood or of mind, unconquerable in our dependence upon God. God calls us to nothing less than to stand unshakeable as the shakeable is being shaken'.

As was experienced more recently with Cardinal Hume, it was that depth of contemplation, or to use the words of the Benedictine monk, Thomas Cullinan, that 'point of union with the numinous and living God, his Father', which gave spine and meaning to Hugh's prophetic ministry and especially for justice and truth.

Unsurprisingly the mendicant religious orders of this time, the Franciscans and the Dominicans and others, led not only to spiritual renewal but also social action. The motto of the Carthusian order is 'The Cross stands whilst the world revolves'. It was his belief that everything flows from this which gave Hugh his stability and security. Undaunted, it was in the very cosmopolitan society of the twelfth century, this rich and fertile society – and remember it wasn't long before that the great northern Italian Anselm had been Archbishop of Canterbury – that this French monk bishop Hugh took on the most powerful and even the King.

The authenticity of Hugh's friendship with God fed his vision and embrace for the dignity and worth of all people and especially those on the margins of society. The fear and hatred of the stranger in our midst goes back a long way. Hugh's support for the Jews in Lincoln was key to their survival and today his name would be included in those deemed Righteous among the Nations at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. His care for the lepers did as much for him as he did for them. What did he say? St 'Martin's kiss cleansed the leper's body, but the leper's kiss cleans my soul'.

It's interesting that when Sir Richard Southern, in his Pelican *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, makes reference to St Hugh it is the story of how Hugh would insist on dismounting from his horse to confirm the children: 'however great his hurry or fatigue, however rough the road, or bleak the weather'. No wonder it was said of Hugh: 'the whole human race is as dear to him as himself; his super-abundant charity embraces and cherishes all men'.

Those are powerful and disturbing words as we reflect upon the events in Paris over this past week, as we are increasingly sucked into a new dark age where the clash of civilisations and rampant destruction and violence seem to hold sway. In a world of pygmies, the giants are paradoxically those who can lose themselves in God, the ultimate reality, and find themselves in their total giving to others.

Hugh died in London after Vespers on 16 November 1200. The story has it that the streets from London to Lincoln were lined by people of all ranks mourning his passing and wanting to watch him go by. The Kings of both England and Scotland took a turn in carrying his coffin. In Lincoln Hugh's swan was ready to greet his master. Another great Lincoln man, Michael Ramsey, described a saint as 'one who has a strange nearness to God and makes God real and near to other people'. God give us grace, like Hugh, to be and do just that.

St Hugh pray for us.