

Address by Revd Canon Simon Griffiths of Truro at the 2019 Fr Ignatius Memorial Trust Pilgrimage

It is lovely to be here; thank you for inviting me to preach. Now, I know what you're all thinking: 'What has he come as?' Well, this is what residentiary canons of Truro cathedral wear, and it's based upon the mediaeval Celtic monastic quire habit, the almuce being worn, rather than the traditional Anglican academic dress that is traditionally worn at Mattins and Evensong. I am sure that Fr Ignatius would have approved!

One morning in April 1864, a group of men emerged from St Laurence's church in Norwich dressed in monk's habit having attended a service there. It appears that, upon leaving the church that they were ambushed by a group of rough men who caused a public disturbance, pushing and shoving the poor brothers so that one was reported to have fainted and had to be helped back to the buildings where the small community lived. It is hard in this day and age to imagine what would have caused such a disturbance, and indeed why people could get so worked up about religious matters, but in trying to understand what was really going on, we have to consider the mindset of the people at the time.

About ten years ago now, when I was Vicar of St Matthew's in Sheffield, we had a very close ecumenical relationship, and all the churches and chapels of varying denominations were very close together within the city centre. The Methodist, United Reformed, Roman Catholic and indeed Unitarian churches were almost all in a line and it was by great boast that St Matthew's was the only church that had been planned and hadn't been built as the result of a row! At one meeting of our clergy fraternal, one of the clergy remarked that, if we were to ask one of the laity from one of our churches what the doctrinal differences were between the various denominations he suspected that would not have a clue – nevertheless if you were to ask them what the argument was that led to the establishment of their church back in seventeen hundred and something they would probably be able to tell you, word for word! Collective memory is a funny thing, all our churches, our parishes, our neighbourhoods and communities have their own stories; these are often our own 'oral tradition' and are passed down from person to person, are a part of our story, and therefore affect the way people think.

Thus it was that at the beginning of the Nineteenth century, the official church of Great Britain was the Established Church. There were dissenters who met in their own places of worship and there was a deep-seated suspicion and fear of Roman Catholicism. As a die-hard Anglo-Catholic looking back on the history of the movement, I have to acknowledge that my perception of how it was is probably clouded by my rose-tinted glasses. Deep within the collective conscious was then a remembrance of the extreme political difficulties of the Royalty and the Papacy, and one could not forget the assassins sent to murder the monarch or the history of Papal temporal power and authority as opposed to merely spiritual authority which is what it became as the temporal power of the papacy diminished. Many people in this country feared political turmoil and civil war were the Pope to threaten the political autonomy that had been established in this country. Within living memory at the time was the bloody anarchy of the French revolution which exterminated all the aristocracy and those in power – and there was a real fear in this country at the time that civil war would lead to the same bloodshed and anarchy which must be avoided at all costs. There was also the influence of the Reformation and of the teaching of Luther, Calvin and the other reformers which was engrained within society as an antidote or protest against Rome. Anything then that seemed to encourage, or look like Roman Catholicism was viewed with deep suspicion. Even further compounded within the corporate memory of the people was a memory of the monastic influence within the country. While it is true that many monasteries established schools to provide education and hospitals to care for the sick (there go my rose-tinted

glasses again) nevertheless it is also true that they wielded enormous political influence and had an often negative effect on the local populace. Monastic communities such as the size of Llanthony or Tintern needed enormous funds to maintain them, and this was often achieved by raising revenue from those who lived and farmed on monastic lands who were required to pay rent and tithes, which were often deeply resented. We know also the need for the Roman Catholic Church to raise funds was also resented and, if you read Chaucer, this was sometimes achieved by deeply unethical, extortionate and fraudulent means. So there is a lot in the background which casts deep suspicion in what was about to happen here in Llanthony.

It was in 1870 then, merely forty years after Catholic emancipation and seven years since the beginnings of the Oxford Movement that a group of men arrived in Llanthony to establish a monastery here, led by its impressive, learned, charismatic and self-appointed self-styled abbot, Fr Ignatius. The choice of Llanthony as the site of the new monastery had both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, there was historic precedent as there had been an important and large monastery here already, it was an isolated place and peaceful which would be extremely welcome to the members of the community after the opposition and hostility they had experienced elsewhere, and the tranquillity would enable them to devote themselves to a life of prayer and communal living befitting a monastery. If the isolation was an advantage, it was also an extreme disadvantage, and had an effect on vocations and indeed on the lack of wealthy patrons who could fund the venture. So life for the community was a struggle, and the barren landscape and isolation were a bar to keeping some of the community members who found life here intolerable. I have to say also, that it is highly likely that the extremely austere life and regime of Fr Ignatius' monastery probably also led to many leaving – the long days, the small simple meals and Fr Ignatius' insistence that a member of the community could not speak to him without first kneeling, or pass him by without first prostrating themselves. Thank goodness these rules weren't known about when I was at Theological College!

But not all was bad. The community and its life caused great intrigue and many came to view the life of the community and to soak up its spirituality and to learn from it. Fr Ignatius was obviously a kindly man and a superb preacher, being in great demand and often leaving for prolonged preaching tours in order to raise money to fund the monastery. At a time when social care meant the workhouse and many were openly dying in the streets of our cities and where families were unable to feed their children, Fr Ignatius took into the community the monastery boys, probably and sadly given up by parents unable to feed and clothe them. In the monastery they were fed, educated, clothed and probably loved. At a time when schools and education were denied to many ordinary children, a school was established at the monastery.

But despite Fr Ignatius' obvious charisma, despite his popularity in some quarters, despite him being an object of fascination for others, there were difficulties. He was deeply authoritarian towards members of his community, and he also managed to fall out constantly with bishops – mind you, many clergy will tell you that that is often not difficult to do! But this was catastrophic for a community deeply embedded in the full rituals of the Church as Fr Ignatius never did manage to become ordained in the Church of England, only eventually becoming ordained priest by a dubious *episcopus vagans* (wandering bishop) leading to further suspicion and marginalisation for him and the community.

But the spiritual life of the monastery was like no other place at the time. Several services a day, incense, Benediction, fasting, monastic offices – and all around the time that some clergy were being prosecuted for the wearing of a surplice or the placing of candles on an altar! The spiritual life of the monastery was attracting attention and intrigue, if not notoriety and the hierarchy of the Church of England were deeply suspicious.

Perhaps of greatest note concerning the monastery were the visions of Our Lady. When claims concerning the apparitions were made public, again deep scepticism was voiced, although some came to see for themselves, the resulting accounts being inconclusive – which is probably truthful. Not everyone saw the apparitions, but what for me gives them a ring of authenticity and truth is that they were first seen by the children, and there is certainly precedent for that, along with the account that the children were frightened at first by it. The fact that we are told that one of the boys, Thomas Foord, took up a stick and was said to have wanted to strike it if it came any closer seems to me to add a certain authenticity and truth to the incidents. It is only as time went on and the apparitions continued that a realisation was arrived at – again there is historic precedent for this in other apparitions of Our Lady. I also have to say that, were this another country, a Catholic one perhaps, that where there had been apparitions of Our Lady that a great basilica perhaps would have been established and a place of pilgrimage also established, but no one in this country seems to know about this hidden and yet quite special place and what occurred here.

The first time I came to Llanthony I was brought here by the Governor of Cardiff prison. No need to worry – I was working there at the time, not a guest! He showed me Fr Ignatius' grave, placed now amidst ruin and decay and told me that, for him, it was the most moving and magical place. Here was Fr Ignatius buried amidst the very vision and place he established. He claimed it had an atmosphere for him that was like no other.

So what can we say of Fr Ignatius' legacy? Was it all just failure?

It is true of course that there was indeed some failure, but his legacy surely is one of deep vocation – of hearing a call and responding to it, despite the obstacles and difficulties that were in the way. Secondly, there is something about his generosity and kindness, providing social welfare and education where there was none and receiving the monastery children into a place of safety, security and perhaps even love. Thirdly, he was undoubtedly a large figure in the Oxford Movement and thereby contributed to the re-establishment and realisation of the Catholic heritage of the Church of England, the Established Church. Fourthly, he was undoubtedly a pioneer in the monastic movement, re-establishing what had been lost at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries in this country.

So what has the story of Fr Ignatius got to teach us today? Well, of all I could say of vocation, of prayer, of being true to our Catholic heritage, indeed of having a healthy contempt for those in power in the Church today and of the value of healthy questioning in matters of faith and order - I'm not going to say anything of that! What I am going to perhaps draw our attention to is that of success and failure in the Christian life. The Christian life is not and can never be all just about success. The call of Jesus Christ to his disciples and followers was not that of one of living a charmed existence, of the certainty of a diadem, a crown, or a privileged existence – the promise of Jesus was one thing and one thing only – the Cross. 'Take up your cross and follow me', Jesus is quoted as saying five times in the Gospels. The story of Fr Ignatius surely calls us to reality in religion: it involves not putting on rose-tinted glasses and imagining things as you would have them be rather than as they are. The reality of living the Christian life is to grapple with faith in times of certainty and times of doubt, when things are easy or hard, when there is light or darkness and also in times of success or failure. We all have our individual story to tell and the path we are called to tread – and that involves carrying our own cross along the way. Fr Ignatius lies buried not only among the ruins of what once was, but amidst also the many things that he achieved. No one can doubt the pioneering work he did, the vision he possessed and the commitment he had to bring it about. I wonder whether that will be said of us after our days?