

SAINT WALBURGE'S DAY

1st May 2016

“Thou hast loved justice, and hated iniquity: therefore God, thy God,
hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness.”

– *Psalms 44:8.*



In what must be one of the most memorable songs from Gilbert and Sullivan, the Lord High Executioner from *The Mikado* tells us that he's “got a little list” of particularly annoying members of society and for some reason he singles out for particular opprobrium “the lady novelist.” Fortunately, I don't think that our dear Saint Walburge would quite fall into that category, though you might not know that she was in fact the first female author of England – or, for that matter, of Germany, her adopted second homeland.

Saint Walburge is not one of the better known saints – I think it must be rare for priests to pronounce this name at the baptismal font – but in fact her story is a fascinating one, full of little facts like the one I just mentioned. I would confess a bit sheepishly that, when I was appointed to this church as a newly ordained priest not even two years ago, I had never even heard of Saint Walburge: I say, I *would* be ashamed to admit this, did I not suspect that even you longtime Preston folk may not know a great deal about our patron saint.

In many ways, Saint Walburge seems far removed from us: a member of a family of saints from 1200 years ago, born in a world that was emerging from paganism just as ours is slipping back into it. Nonetheless, divine Providence has given her to us as a guide and I would go so far as to say that she is very much a saint for our times.

In her own way, Saint Walburge was a pioneer of what is called the first evangelisation of Europe: that spiritual struggle that went on for several hundred years in order to bring the fragmented patchwork of Angles and Saxons, Picts and Jutes, Franks and Lombards to the true faith. Looking back at this heroic epoch, Pope Leo XIII pointed out: “Christian Europe has subdued barbarous nations, and changed them from a savage to a civilized condition, from superstition to true worship. It victoriously rolled back the tide of Mohammedan conquest; retained the headship of civilization; stood forth in the front rank as the leader and teacher of all, in every branch of national culture; bestowed on the world the gift of true and many-sided liberty; and most wisely founded very numerous institutions for the solace of human suffering” (*Immortale Dei*, par. 21). Christianity – the universal faith – knows how to take up what is good and true in every culture she meets. Therefore, the Church belongs to no one people or culture, because she belongs to all. Nonetheless, it is true that having been faithful to the Gospel for a thousand years and more,

Europe long enjoyed a profound and vibrant Christian civilisation: at least, as truly Christian as any fragment of the City of Man can be in this fallen world. Saint Walburge herself was the beneficiary of this nascent Christian civilisation before undertaking her own missionary work in Germany. In the monastic cloister at Wimborne she was nurtured for 26 years in the school of letters and the school of holiness, before she responded to the call of her uncle, the great martyr-bishop Saint Boniface, requesting her aid to work for the conversion of Germany. Without the sacrifices of a Saint Walburge or a Saint Boniface, dear friends, you and I would not be here in church today; we would be in a forest worshipping a tree like our poor heathen ancestors.

In our own day, we often hear about the necessity for what is called a *new* evangelisation. Like all slogans, this expression has its usefulness and its limits. Evangelisation means to share the “good news” of Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead, and this has always been the mission of the Church. It would be a betrayal of our mission if we interpreted evangelisation today merely as a vague attempt to spread cooperation, well-being and chumminess. That is not why Saint Walburge left her homeland! Evangelisation means promoting union with Christ in its different degrees. In other words, evangelisation concretely means helping practicing Catholics to grow in holiness and to become apostles; helping lapsed or non-practicing Catholics to return to the sacraments; and helping non-Catholics to become Catholics. It is that simple. Authentic Catholic evangelism is inspired by this profound conviction: no one goes to God except through Christ, and no one goes to Christ except through the Church he founded.

If anything is “new” about the evangelisation the Church must undertake today it is certainly not in the goal proposed – the missionary conquest of all men – but is merely the acknowledgment that we now live in a society that is not simply non-Christian like the ancient paganism, but one that is, as the pessimistic label has it, “post-Christian.” Over half a century ago, C.S. Lewis presciently put his finger on the new paganism we face today when he said: “A post-Christian man is not a Pagan; you might as well think that a married woman recovers her virginity by divorce. The post-Christian is cut off from the Christian past and therefore doubly from the Pagan past” (*De descriptione temporum*, 1954). In some ways, therefore, our mission today is more difficult than that faced by Saint Walburge in the pagan Europe of the eighth century. What are we to do about it?

I appeal to you today, Christian parents. Saint Walburge was the daughter of saints, the sister of two sainted brothers and the niece of a sainted martyr. If you dream of reconverting our pagan world, you must become saints! Pass on the faith to your children, and show them that it is worth loving and worth sacrificing for. I appeal to you today, young people. In a world that becomes uglier every day, a world that tells you that you must live for pleasure, you

know better than that. You know that you have an immortal soul and you know that a soul can be lost or a soul can be saved. I do not know if you will be asked to give your life in red martyrdom like Saint Boniface or white martyrdom like Saint Walburge, but I do know that God is asking great things of you. If you are thinking of a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life, be generous with God! The saint we are celebrating today reminds us that there are indeed sacrifices in such a life. Saint Walburge was a princess but she did not spend her life on a throne. If you, dear young friends, could save only one single soul by following Christ to the seminary or the convent, then no sacrifice would be too great. I appeal to you today, truth-seekers in our midst. A church as beautiful as this one, with the glorious traditional Mass we have inherited from our ancestors, always attracts an occasional enquirer, or the simply curious or those seeking a bit of peace, or a non-Catholic invited by one of our regulars. We are so glad you are here! But, please, I implore you, do not stay on the threshold! Today the Lord is whispering in your heart and he says, "Behold, I stand at the gate, and knock" (Apocalypse 3:20). Sometimes we are afraid to open the door: hesitations, doubts, sacrifices that may be asked of us. Are you attracted by Catholicism but hesitant about some points you do not understand? Come ask one of the priests: that is what they are for. Do you feel nervous about the life-altering prospect of becoming a Catholic? Come talk to one of the many converts here, who will be happy to share their own experiences, crosses and joys.

A moment ago – I hope I did not alarm you – I said that our task may be more daunting than that faced by Saint Walburge in the days of the first evangelisation. No one worships a tree in Preston today, but we are surrounded by the false gods of comfort, materialism and relativism. The attitude of "been there, done that" which rejects our country's residual Christianity as an outmoded fad is probably more dangerous than the outright heathenism of the ancient world. Even so, God does not give us challenges we cannot overcome. "I can do all these things in him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). And here we must imitate Saint Walburge: knowing and loving our faith, generously responding to our own vocation and seeking Christ daily in prayer. No need to reinvent the wheel. Dear friends, be faithful, be holy, and you will set the world on fire.