St Giles Reading, Patronal Festival, 31 August 2014

Today we have celebrated the feast of St Giles, a man who spent much of his adult life dedicated to solitary life and prayer in deserted places. (He died in the year 710 at around sixty.) Like many such people before and since many sought him out, seeking guidance, and a word that would bring life. Towards the end of his life he allowed several more persistent disciples to gather round him, and (since this was the first century of the Benedictine rule) he finally settled a small and disciplined monastery for their life together.

Today is also the feast of St Aidan, an Irishman from the monastery at Iona, who died a year after Giles was born. His ministry as bishop and missionary was for his biographer, the Venerable Bede (who was no flatterer), the prime example of pastoral care and sensitivity, of insight and compassion for those in need.

Both men were heirs of the early traditions of Christian monasticism that had first really flourished among the fathers and mothers of the Egyptian desert two or three centuries before. Giles sought to be a disciple of Jesus in an apparently extreme and in every sense risky solitude; Aidan embraced the call to pastoral and missionary work and rooted it in a new monastery at Lindisfarne. Both had chosen to follow Christ to foreign lands (Giles being a Greek in France, and Aidan an Irishman in Northumbria); both were close to the kings and local magnates of their adopted home, and were venerated by them as men of huge spiritual authority. Unfortunately Giles is nowhere near as well served by a biographer as Aidan; and though neither of them left writings, both did leave enormous legacies of the fruit of the Spirit.

So it is perhaps not strange that we’re left asking the question—especially in the light of Jesus’s warnings about discipleship in our gospel passage—what the monastic discipleship of Giles and Aidan, and the tradition of monastic community life has to teach the church and the parish—including this parish—today.

Well: we could be here for days with that one! But we get a glimpse of one answer in our epistle: ‘Dear children’, says St John, ‘we can know that we have indeed passed from death to life, because we love the brethren (ie, the family of the Church) … Jesus laid down his life for us; and we ought to do the same for our brothers and sisters’ (1 Jn 3.14). It is one of those moments in the New Testament when we get a sense of what the early Christians thought was going on in the early Church. ‘Let us not love [simply] in word or in speech, but in deed and truth.’ (v.18)

Giles, like Aidan, like Benedict, like the early monastic saints before them, knew that lives of prayerfulness, of personal poverty, of mutual sharing in some form of common life—together with an attitude of gentleness, insight and compassion to the poor and needy—was the most potent way to enlarge the kingdom of God.

Giles’s reputation was such that within 15 years of his death Bede had included him in his Martyrology (amazing given he’d lived in ‘the back of beyond’ at the mouth of the Rhone valley): so perhaps we may take Bede’s own account of St Augustine’s early community in Canterbury (i.26), as a trustworthy description of the full and life-changing force of the early monastic commitment to kind of life the Apostles shared: ‘They imitated’ (he says) ‘the way of life practiced in the early Church; applying themselves to frequent prayer, watching and fasting; preaching the word of life to as many as they could; despising worldly things as not belonging to them; living in all respects what they preached to others; always ready to suffer (even to die) for what they preached. In short, people believed and were baptized because they admired the simplicity of their lives, and the freshness of their teaching.’

The point is clear enough: the believability of the Church’s mission is bound up with the common life of Christians and with their readiness to share with everyone and anyone what they have received, both spiritually and practically. You’ll be pleased to hear that not every missionary from St Giles Reading (that’s each of you) has to be a hermit, not even a monk! But what changes human hearts so far as the NT is concerned—what helps people more than anything to catch the word of truth and the gift of life—is the visible demonstration of new possibilities for life together. A life without greed or anxiety, a life that’s not ashamed to depend on the generosity of others (inside and outside the community), a life unified and motivated by the study of God’s word and by Spirit-filled prayer.

This in turn suggests that we will seriously mis-understand Christian mission if we think it is a matter of persuading people to accept certain religious ideas. The truth of any Christian idea or doctrine is something that becomes obvious only in the light of the sorts of human life that those ideas make imaginable or possible. It’s when we human beings can see with our own eyes, and receive in our own hands, the goodness of a generous and sharing community—one that is sustained by the dedication of each part of the day to God’s honour in prayer and contemplation of his word—that we are much, much more likely to grasp and to believe, that the self-obsessed, protective, even self-destructive habits of the world at large can be transformed definitively by God’s grace. The ‘promise’ that Christian teaching makes—our hope of heaven—becomes credible when earthly life is transformed.

And perhaps this is where we should begin in thinking about mission in a parish like this: what should the Christian promise look like here? The life of Giles’s new community near Nimes, or Aidan’s at Lindisfarne, or Augustine’s at Canterbury, was evidence offered to those around of a new and trustworthy future – a new level of mutual care, but also a new way to approach God.

There’s a great deal more that could be said about what this life might look like—and that might be work for a parish retreat together—and how it might be shaped in modern Britain, or more importantly here in Reading! But the point is clear: our humility and our life together are the things that must quite literally flesh out what we Christians believe about Jesus Christ. As St John says in our epistle: ‘Anyone who has the means of life in this world, and sees his brother or sister in need, and closes their heart against then: how is the love of living God in them?’ (1 Jn 3.17). The Church’s teaching concerning Christ is not theory to be explained or proved: it simply spells out in words what Christian living suggests as it is experienced and prayed and shared. If we want to communicate who and what Christ is, Christian lives have to be lived. The more dull and conformed to the surrounding world Christian life becomes, the more difficult it is going to become to present the love and joy of Jesus Christ to them.

The converting power of the apostolic life. St Giles, and the monastic tradition he embodied, help ‘to sharpen the focus’ for the contemporary Church about what’s needed in our life and mission today. The praying and serving community shows people how they can be can discover both freedom, communion; how God is different; how the world is loved in its entirety; how worship and discipleship is the most fulfilling form of self-giving; and how we can gain a pervasive confidence that we can find our home in God’s goodness and beauty.

So, if we could imagine St Giles tweeting Reading, he might well have chosen to re-tweet words from St Benedict (whose new Rule he put his disciples under). In that Rule (ch. 4), St Benedict had written, “Your way of acting (dear friends at St Giles Reading) should be different from the world’s way: the love of Christ must come before all else.”