

PRICE OF LIFE IN 16TH CENTURY ENGLAND: 15s 10D

St John Stone, Feast Day 25th October

On 14th December 1538 Richard Ingworth, was sent by Chancellor Thomas Cromwell to Canterbury to persuade all the Augustinian Friars living in the Monastery there, to sign a formal document acknowledging Henry VIII as Head of the Church. Ingworth had been a Dominican Friar and was made Bishop of Dover after he signed the Act of Supremacy; he went to the Whitefriars Monastery in December 1538 to receive its surrender to the King. All signed - except John Stone.

I have often wondered what makes a saint and especially a martyr. Do they lead exceptionally good lives, praying from morning until night, doing good works? Are they happy people? Do they have friends and family or are they born into an extra special world untouched by other people or influences? That all seems a bit far fetched but they must be special in a religious sort of way to enable them to stand up to the dreadful deaths they faced as martyrs and the influence they have had from beyond the grave. Reading several biographies of saints I found them to be, well, just like me - ordinary with the normal family and friends network, going about their normal everyday lives as we all try to do. However, when the great test of faith came to them they have all been swift to respond and extremely brave facing the horrific death that awaited anyone prepared to die for their faith.

I recently stumbled across an account of the life and martyrdom of St John Stone someone I had never heard of and was intrigued by this man's simple faith and determined loyalty to the Pope. By denying King Henry VIII as supreme head of the church in England. John Stone was, by all accounts, a good man, loyal to the Catholic Church and to the Pope in Rome. Along with so many other of the time, he would not accept the King as the Head of the Church of England. Seeing this as an act of betrayal Richard Ingworth reported John Stone to Thomas Cromwell for treason. Ingworth sent for the Mayor of Canterbury to see if he could influence John, but still he would not sign. According to Canon Michael Bunce's account of John Stone's life, Ingworth described John Stone's behaviour in the following words: "one Friar there very rudely and traitorously used

himself before all the company....”

John Stone was sent to the Tower of London where he stayed for several months before being sent back to Canterbury to stand trial for treason and, under the 1535, Treason Act the penalty for high Treason was death, as John Stone had professed no appeal was allowed. Nicholas Harpsfield a Catholic apologist and biographer reported that Stone prayed and fasted for three days, in a religious experience, he is said to have heard a voice telling him to be of good heart and not to worry about dying. Stone, according to a friend, gained much strength from this message and never once thought about changing his mind.

Details of his death do not make interesting reading for the faint-hearted. According to Fr Sean Flannery’s book, “Saints and Blessed”, “Friar Stone would be bound and dragged on a hurdle through the street to the place of execution, the mound by the city walls called Dunjeon now known as the Dane John – hanged there on a scaffold – cut down while still alive – heart and other organs cut out and burned before your eyes – your head and quarters chopped off, parboiled and placed over the city gates“. The sentence was carried out in all its gory details on Saturday December 27th 1539.

Canterbury City Archives contains an itemised account for the expenses of the execution:

“Paid for half a ton of timber to make a pair of gallows to hang Friar Stone –

Two shillings and sixpence;

Paid for a hurdle – 6 pence

Paid to three men that carried his quarters to the gates and set them up – 12 pence

Paid for a halter to hang him – (the torso was probably buried in the ground under the gallows) – 1 penny

Paid to him that did the execution – 4 shillings and 8 pence“.

The total cost of getting rid of this awkward monk, in a way that would discourage any other ‘would-be’ martyrs, came to 15 shillings and 10 pence, a large sum for the time. The usual cost would have been 6 pence!

Ironically, the site of the scaffolding meant that, as he stood on the platform, John would have been able to see for the last time his beloved Augustinian Friary, I wonder if the authorities realised this, it could have been a deliberate choice in the hope of a last minute change of mind by John Stone or just a coincidence. The site of Whitefriars

Monastery is now covered with a shopping centre but still retains the Whitefriars name.

Little is known about St John Stone, except that he was one of the 40 martyrs of England and Wales pronounced saints by Pope Paul VI on 25th October 1970. According to Fr Sean Flannery's book, he was 'not a well educated man', but like Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher he was prepared to face the death of a martyr for opposing King Henry VIII's wishes. His simple faith led him along the same road as so many other loyal Catholics in England at that time. The persecution of Catholics in the 16th century gave the Catholic Church so many of its saints and most of them were well known at the time with witness statements filed in their local records office with details of family history; but there is no record of John Stone's early life. Most recorders have noted this fact and have assumed that he must have been born and brought up in Canterbury, as this was where he joined the Augustinian Monastery.

Why then, have the Order of Augustinian Recollects named one of their London houses after a relatively unknown person? According to another book written by Fr Sean Flannery, "Not the Whole Story", the Augustinian Recollects bought the house in Kensington in 1970 an event which coincided with the canonisation of the 40 martyrs of England & Wales of whom, St John Stone was one, so in celebration of that event, they decided to name the house after their brother Augustinian who had just been canonised. However, that still doesn't explain what influence he still has in the 21st century?

Fr Gerald Wilson O.A.R., Vicar Provincial for England gave me an hour of his precious time to explain why John Stone is so important to them. The first point he made was that John Stone was one of the few English Augustinian Saints and stands out as one of the few religious friars who stood up for his faith, he made a singular heroic stance, was not afraid to speak his mind clearly and was not subservient to current trends. Fr Gerald went on to explain that, unlike the suicide bombers of today who aim to hurt as many people as possible, John Stone's self-immolation and self-sacrifice hurt no one except himself.

Monastery's in John Stone's time were important to the wealth of the nation, towns were built up around them, the monks offered employment to local people, they provided the social services of the time, to have a friar go against the wishes of the Crown would be seen as a weakness and needed to be stopped before others followed his example. Canterbury had been the Primacy of the Catholic Church, taken by force by the King's

men and made the Headquarters of the new Anglican Church, the Crown could not afford to have a dissenter in the heart of the it's Headquarters.

It is interesting to note that after the Reformation there were far-reaching consequences, history tells us that that the burden of pastoral care was removed from monastic institutions onto the parishes. The seeds for the secular takeover 'the journey of life' or 'cradle to grave' were sown in this period, care for the poor, sick and needy were embraced by the parish, and the records noting births, marriages and deaths were now kept locally.

Canon Bunce's account tells us that the new parish churches built after the Civil War embraced some of the radical ideas that had found expression in the commonwealth, whilst a growing number of 'secular' religions abandoned churches altogether in favour of meeting houses. However, thanks to people like St John Stone, the Catholic Church did survive; it may have been driven 'underground' for over 300 years but finally it emerged in 1896 with full recognition of the Crown.

John Stone is just one person along with thousands of other friars, monks and nuns who helped to build this country and whose graves are not marked. Fr Gerald said that St John Stones "seemingly futile death has inspired the Augustinians both in England and abroad to stand up for themselves in spite of the torrential flow of current opinion".

It is obvious then that the Augustinian Recollects have named their house in London after a great saint, it is a pity they have kept knowledge of this great man to themselves. His story could inspire a whole new generation of people to be brave in the face of adversity, to have faith and trust in God. What a shame then there is no reference to him in *The Lives of the Saints* published in 1988 - 18 years after his canonisation - there is still no mention of him - the only forum for information on this interesting man is via the World Wide Web or by talking to an Augustinian Friar. The Augustinian Recollects are rightly proud of St John Stone he is an important part of their long history.

There is a pictorial record of John Stone on an engraving, which depicts him in his prison cell and was printed in 1612 at Liege in a volume by Georges Maigret Buillonoy (1573-1633) O.S.A. According to Canon Bunce, there is a fine relief of John Stone by Sister Concordia of Minster Abbey in the Martyrs' chapel of St Thomas' Catholic Church, Burgate, Canterbury and, as well as the Augustinian Recollects house in London, the

University of Kent have named their Catholic Chaplaincy after John Stone 'in memory of a man who chose death rather than go against his conscience'. The Chaplain, Rev Peter Geldard, informed me that John Stone was the Prior of Whitefriars, but I have no written proof of that and he is only one to claim that John was the Prior.

In the 1500's 330 people were executed for treason, according to the BBC History Web site, many were young 75% of those whose ages are known were under 14 at the time of the break with Rome and would have been under 35 at the time of their excruciating death. A life that cost the state just 15s. 10d. (a little over 75p today) There are no recorded details of John Stone's birth, so we can assume he came in this category and was a young man in his 30's when he stood alone in the Monastery, against the English Crown. John Stone was canonised as one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales by Pope Paul VI on 25th October 1970, the day each year when the Augustinians celebrate his feast.

Maybe John Stone's example of going against public opinion could be used to influence, not just those who have chosen the religious life but Catholics and all those who object to abortion, euthanasia and the many other abominations that are happening in our world, to stand up and be counted. To encourage people to campaign for better education and health care for people in the Third World, there a number of worthy causes that would benefit from a more outspoken and loyal group of people.

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