

Aughton and the Pilgrimage of Grace

All Saints' church, Aughton, 27th June, 2008 (greatly adapted from 2002 and 2003).

I last spoke at an Aughton Pilgrimage of Grace commemoration five years ago, when I gave a version of a few of the things I will say tonight. But then I told the story very much from the Pilgrim's point of view. My talk had an elegiac tone, siding firmly with the Pilgrims against their king, and seeing the consequences of king Henry's actions in an entirely negative light – and it's hard to see the immediate effects any other way. I saw the dissolution of the monasteries only in terms of cultural, social and religious losses. The only virtue I saw in the cruel end of the Pilgrimage was the magnificent example the Pilgrims and their leaders set for us of bravery and the fierce defence of principle.

All of these things are true, but they are partial truths which represent only part of the whole picture. Undoubtedly the immediate results of the Pilgrimage were almost entirely negative, but it is possible to interpret some of the longer-term effects, sometimes surprisingly and even perversely, as having had positive consequences, although these could not have been foreseen at the time. Many of them still profoundly affect our lives today, and have made possible the growth of ideas and opinions which daily fill our newspapers and broadcasts, and occupy our politicians.

But before we come to these things, it is worth sketching in with a broad brush the dramatic events leading to the Pilgrimage of Grace, beginning with a little of the early history of Aughton and Ellerton, centuries before the events in which Robert Aske played so crucial a part.

The first significant family of record hereabouts were the de la Haye's, who perhaps came over from France during or shortly after the Norman conquest. They built a small castle here, its keep raised up on a still-surviving earthen mound, and established a small stone church nearby (this one), carefully sited where the land rose above the Derwent ings.

The de la Haye's were among the patrons of a small Gilbertine Priory established c.1203, one mile north at Ellerton, and by the 1330s, the windows of the Priory church contained stained glass incorporating the shields of arms of influential local families, including their own. The Priory was a charitable house of canons, founded to care for the elderly poor in an age when those without children, money, land or family, or too frail to work, had no other means of survival. Like other mediaeval religious houses, it was a source of employment, and will have offered hospitality to strangers and care to the sick. One of the canons of Ellerton, John of Wyntringham who died in the 1340s, was vicar of this church. The de la Haye's may also have been patrons of a small nunnery at Thicket, just across the river.

In 1365 Richard de Aske from North Yorkshire married Elizabeth, the last de la Haye heiress, and inherited the castle and its estates. Over the next hundred years the castle was replaced by a more comfortable moated manor house, which stood where the Hall still stands. To get here this evening we walked beside the now-dry moat. Over the same period, larger windows and a north aisle were added to the church, and the chancel may have been re-built.

Among Richard and Elizabeth's descendants was a 16th century lawyer called Robert Aske, as least one son in each generation seems to have been. This Robert was a respected advocate and barrister, who practiced in York and London, but certainly spent time on his family's lands at Aughton. He will have walked through the door by which you entered the church today, will have stood in the same nave (although under a different roof) seeing the same chancel arch, the same arcade and some of the same walls. He will have looked out from this churchyard over a landscape very like the one with which you are familiar, and will have known the monks of Ellerton. In his mid-thirties, he would die a terrible death after three months as a reluctant hero, leading an army of the common people to voice their discontents and to plead with their king, Henry VIII.

Early in the 1530s, a series of Acts of Parliament and edicts were passed which many ordinary people felt went against their interests. The chief of these concerned; the dissolution of the religious houses, which were central to the structure of many aspects of religious and social life; the supremacy of the king in religious affairs in England; making treasonable all words written or spoken against the king (it is worth bearing in mind what is happening today in Zimbabwe); many significant feasts and holy days, which the common folk regarded as central to their religious observance and allegiances, were to be suppressed.

In August 1536, more than 20 abbeys and priories were announced for closure in Yorkshire alone, including Ellerton, and similar lists were drawn up for Cumberland, Westmorland, Lincolnshire and elsewhere. The townspeople of Hexham and Lanercost rose up to prevent the confiscation of their Priors, and events began to move with incredible speed. On 1st October, the people of Louth rose up to defend the treasures of their church from confiscation. On the 2nd parts of Lincolnshire were roused by church bells summoning assemblies to capture and imprison the king's commissioners and to complain to the government. On 4th October, Robert Aske rode from Aughton, crossed the Humber, and joined the rebels. On 5th he was appointed Captain of a cohort.

By now the rising was unstoppable. Beverley, Ripon and York were swiftly defended against the rebels, as small rebellions broke out across the north. The bells of Howdenshire and the Marshlands of Humber and Don were readied to summon the people, three great assemblies marched on Lincoln, and a huge muster was held on the Westwood at Beverley. Beacons were fired to alert the lowlands of Holderness, and Aske ordered great assemblies at Skipwith Common and Kexby Moor where he addressed the men as 'pilgrims'. Some suppressed religious houses were snatched back from the King and re-occupied. York was soon given up to Aske and his men, and the pilgrims nailed a proclamation to the door of the Minster. The Counties of Westmorland and Northumberland rose up, and on 19th October Hull fell to the rebel army - and Hull, remember, is 'King's town'-upon-Hull.

Vast hosts came from the north and north-west to join the men of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and Robert Aske, was recognised as their leader. The great pilgrim army could call upon at least 40,000 men (some accounts suggest as many as 60,000) including up to 10,000 on horseback. This is an immense number. The pilgrims saw themselves as representative of 'the commons', the ordinary, loyal citizenry of England. All who were able wore the pilgrims' badge, showing the five wounds of Christ, and at the head of each great company, walked priests bearing tall, painted banners.

Every pilgrim swore an oath, its text composed by Robert Aske himself. It was made clear in the oath that the pilgrimage was a protest borne of love and loyalty, intended to resist so-called 'evil councillors' and 'villein blood' - not the king himself, who was God's anointed, or 'his issue'. The pilgrims were for the good of the commons, and intended no violence without utmost provocation. Their goal was the protection of ancient traditions and familiar ways around which the pattern of their lives had been woven and upon which they believed their security to depend.

By now the pilgrims had formulated their demands to be set before the king: a pardon to be granted to all pilgrims, without exception; a parliament to be held at some convenient place in the north; that no man living north of the river Trent should be forced to attend court except at York; that the suppressed monasteries should all be restored, the authority of the Pope re-established and Acts of Parliament grievous to the common people repealed; that certain of the king's advisers should be removed from his Privy Council and that the commissioners suppressing the monasteries should be prosecuted for bribery and extortion.

When they reached Pontefract, Aske addressed the pilgrims' demands to the Duke of Norfolk's emissary, hoping they would be taken to the king and parliament. They were rejected, so Aske and 30,000 men swept on to Doncaster, where Norfolk, commander of the royal army, nervously waited with as few as 5,000 troops, the rest of his army having yet to arrive. Here the pilgrims might easily have triumphed without a battle, but the bridge was defended by cannon and the Don, swollen by floods, was impassable to so great an army. They were forced to make camp and to parley with the king's man.

Norfolk deliberately slowed the pace of negotiation in the hope that his army would arrive before the pilgrims dispersed. He had been empowered to offer a free pardon to all but ten of their leaders, after which he would take their demands to the king, but this offer was rejected by the pilgrims, who instead proposed a battle to settle their demands. Norfolk was rattled. He had insufficient men to win an all-out fight, and begged the king to let him re-negotiate. Eventually an amnesty was reached on terms which included a General Pardon for all, the promise of a future parliament in York at which the pilgrims' grievances would be discussed, and the re-occupation of the religious houses. On 9th December the pilgrim army was dispersed, and their leaders rode into the town and yielded to the duke by tearing the pilgrim badges from their sleeves.

Having apparently accepted this settlement, the king then issued a proclamation which reveals that he was both very angry and insincere:

And we, with our whole council, think it right strange that thee, who be but brutes and inexpert folk, do take upon you to appoint us who be meet or not for our council; we will, therefore, bear no such meddling at your hands, it being inconsistent with the duty of good subjects to interfere in such matters. (Does this perhaps sound like President Mugabe?)

For several months king Henry did nothing, so early in 1537 pilgrims re-assembled and tried to capture Hull and Carlisle. But now Norfolk and the king had had time to prepare. The pilgrims were repulsed, and 74 of their officers were hanged from the walls of Carlisle.

Aske and the other pilgrim leaders went to London in April that year, having been assured of their safety. However, the king considered that this second uprising had breached the amnesty, and he had them arrested. Aske was tried for high treason and sentenced to death. He was hanged in York, and his body was displayed from Clifford's Tower as a warning. The other pilgrim leaders suffered a similar fate, regardless of rank or of the merits of their cause.

Ellerton Priory was finally dissolved in December, 1538 (only 26 months after the first closures), when the Prior and his brother monks, were pensioned off or given pocket-money to abandon their vows. With what must have been calculated cruelty, the lands of the Priory were granted to the Aske family. With this bitter harvest of wealth they added the handsome tower to Aughton church as a memorial to their brave, shamed son. It rises still, above a curlew-haunted landscape managed now much as it was when Aske grew, lived and prayed here. And so that none mistake the meaning of the tower, a newt - locally called an Aske or Esker - is carved at its foot and an inscription across its south side, facing London and the king. It may be translated as: ***Christopher, second son of Sir Robert Aske, ought not to forget the year 1536.***

I suggested five years ago that if we could keep Aughton's sacred space alive, and could restore something of the generous spirit of Ellerton Priory (both of which we are just managing to do), then 40,000 Pilgrims would have marched to some purpose, and brave folk like Robert Aske would not have died in vain. I saw these places as symbols of a noble sacrifice made to preserve treasures of the spirit and the imagination more valuable to the common people than the greed and pride of Princes.

It is undoubtedly true that the suppression had appalling social consequences which blighted probably hundreds of thousands of lives through poverty, unemployment, vagrancy (especially amongst women, when they were thrown out of their convents), and the loss of social support systems and centres of learning. It is also true that the suppression meant the irreplaceable loss of a huge body of magnificent works of art and craft: much of finest English architecture and sculpture; of decoration and furnishing; of almost the entire literature and music of the mediaeval church. It was the end of a way of life based on five hundred years of tradition and practice. In Yorkshire alone one hundred and six religious houses were suppressed, ranging from huge and mighty places like Fountains and Rievaulx, Byland, Kirkstall and York St. Mary with their hundreds of monks and thousands of lay-brothers and dependants, to tiny isolated houses like Thicket, Ellerton and others, each with a handful of religious and a small local community of needy souls.

And it is true that the reasons behind the suppression and dissolution of the monasteries were ignoble, selfish and suspect; the pique of a divinely-ordained and autocratic king who had to barter with another head of state (the Pope) for permission to divorce Catherine his queen, who seemed unable to bear him a living son, and who therefore prevented him from doing what he regarded as his dynastic duty; his sometimes understandable political distrust of the power and influence of institutions which owed allegiance to Rome and were thus beyond his ultimate control; his suspicion and jealousy of the huge wealth of the Church which he felt should be within the control of the state (represented then by the monarch's own person).

But. And there is always a but, leading to an alternative view. The sudden ending of aspects of mediaeval life and mediaeval attitudes, and the shifting of wealth and influence away from the church toward the equivalent of the national government, represented a significant step on the very long road to secular power, to liberty, to our version of democracy, and to modern pluralism.

Although there was certainly plenty of real piety, real charity and real public service in mediaeval monasticism and its institutions, the mediaeval religious world was also intensely controlling, riddled with empty and crushing superstition, corruption and bigotry, and tainted by intolerance, narrowness, suspicion and deep conservatism. Intellectual curiosity and a spirit of objective enquiry were ruthlessly discouraged and persecuted. The development of science was stifled and suppressed. (It is only very recently that the Vatican apologised to Galileo for daring to be right in the 16th century.)

The inferiority of women, and of many minorities or outsiders, was institutionalised and their freedoms were hugely restricted; indeed the spectacular growth of the cult of the Virgin from the 14th century was partly engineered as a way of keeping women in their place, and offering virginity and saintly, obedient motherhood as the only acceptable role models.

In one sense, Aske and his pilgrim companions were crushed between ungainly shifting masses of ideas moving slowly across the face of the western world. They lost their lives in a kind of social and spiritual earthquake, perhaps as unstoppable as any natural cataclysm, as the vast forces of the passing mediaeval culture and the coming Renaissance one, of the controlling religious ethos and the emerging secular political state, roughly collided. A world, as Matthew Arnold has it in his wonderful poem *Dover Beach*, like a *'darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night.'*

Perhaps I overstate the argument, but the painful end of one world entirely dominated by dogmatic and intolerant religious attitudes (some of which are apparent in the Middle East, and seem to be on the rise again in mid-Western America and in groups like those so-called 'traditionalist' Anglicans meeting at this very moment in Jerusalem), helped make space for the enquiring spirit of the Renaissance and the rediscovery of Classical antiquity, and thus lead to the development of rationalism and humanism. Many of the functions once exercised by the mediaeval religious houses are now carried on by libraries, archives, schools, colleges, hospitals, nursing homes, retirement homes and hospices, hotels, and a vast range of rural and urban businesses.

And other types of pilgrims have emerged since the end of the eighteenth century, and have continued to be nourished by what survives of the ancient sacred places. Many aspects of the Romantic movement of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – much of the greatest art, literature, philosophy and architecture of the West – would scarcely have been possible without a landscape scattered with those *'bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.'* Now many of us are new pilgrims who are secular, pluralist, less rooted, who read Betjeman or Larkin's *Ghurch Going*, who join the National Trust and conservation charities, who church-crawl and explore and have an interest in the heritage of the past, who stay in *Landmark* properties and relish touring across landscapes like the Yorkshire Wolds which owe their very appearance and character to mediaeval monasticism.

After great tragedies and changes, some new life always manages to creep in and take root among the ruins. Ellerton Priory church is an example; a mediaeval monastery and old-peoples home, then a ruin, then a borrowed church, then a ruin again, then a revived parish church, then eighteen years a ruin again, and now finding a new life. At 3.00 pm on Sunday 6th July, 2008, there will be a choral concert in Ellerton church, and it may be the first time that unaccompanied choral music has been heard there since the days of the monks. And we being here tonight is another small act of pilgrimage.

So perhaps we are new Pilgrims of Grace, looking back with regret and compassion, but also looking forward. Using what survives of the ancient sacred places for which Robert Aske and his companion army risked everything, to help us understand and discover ourselves, and where we come from, and what and who really matters to us, and how we are part of the great connected-ness of things, and how we are shaped by ideas and ideals, and of all the many things of which we are capable.

Phil Thomas
Ellerton Church Preservation Trust