

Jer 4: 11-12, 22-28

1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-10

It is a little over 23 years since our community moved from Nashdom Abbey to Elmore. In 1987 there arrived 9 monks in solemn vows, one junior monk and one white rabbit.

It is fifteen years ago this week that Bp John Bone of Reading blessed this Oratory. By that time the community had grown to 13 and the previous year we had celebrated the 70th anniversary of the profession of Dom Augustine. Well done Gus! The future looked hopeful.

A lot has happened in the last 15 years, not least over 38000 church services in this Oratory. But our numbers have declined to four, bones are getting creaky and last year we made the painful decision to look for a smaller home. Looking back on these years is a time for thanksgiving, also a time for humility and penitence.

If men and women could be justified by good works we would have sprouted wings and haloes already – all those church services, all those doorbells answered with smiles when you were in the middle of doing two other things. But those who know us will realise that we are far from having wings and haloes. In fact, it may be a trick of the light, but sometimes I fancy I see signs of horns beginning to develop on my brethren's foreheads.

I can think of twenty people who came to test their vocations here at Elmore and of them only three of us, Dom Kenneth, Dom Bruce and myself, are still here, alongside Dom Francis, the sole survivor from the Nashdom years. Of those who left I would have to say that I think the majority were always going to leave, one in fact failed to last a weekend. They were not suited to the fundamentals of the life here or they were looking for something that was not what the religious life really had to give, a life where spiritual growth, if it comes, arises not just from the beauty of the liturgy and the peace of the house and the gardens, and the inspiring books read, but from wrestling faithfully before God with the fairly unremitting frustrations arising from constantly rubbing up against your brethren's and your own limitations.

Nevertheless people came to the monastery I believe, with good intentions. It would be the height of pride and arrogance to say that those who stayed were truly seeking God and those who left were seeking – well, something else. I think most, if not all, were seeking to respond to God's fundamental call to growth in love and service. When we say that people have found their vocation it is because we see that they have found a place where they can

flourish and become who they are meant to be – wholeheartedly loving and serving others selflessly.

Vocations need not be exotic. A couple of years ago I was staying in Bridlington, a Yorkshire seaside resort that has a fine coastline and good sandy beaches, but is far from exotic, and walking back from a visit to the medieval Bridlington Priory I went into a fish and chip shop in an especially run down part of what is frankly a run down town. There was a long queue, as I advanced towards my fish and chips it became more and more apparent that the proprietors had found their vocation. They were **meant** to run a fish and chip shop. They had an entirely natural, mushy peas and curry sauce, gift of friendliness and banter. They were serving mainly local clientele and most were known to them. Some looked pretty downtrodden. The owners had a warm word for everyone including me. It seemed to me that everyone must have left that little sanctuary of cheerfulness, peace and pickled eggs a little more convinced that life was worth living. The fish and chips weren't bad either.

So to return to the monastery, I would say of the people who did not stay that they did not find in the monastery a place where they could truly flourish. St Benedict says that monks should accept trials and even goes so far as to say that we should be eager for them. He is entirely realistic about the humility that is needed if a monk is to live out his vocation faithfully, in the face of difficulties, but our community had had many strained, awkward, distant and even toxic relationships within it. Over the years we have not succeeded in cherishing each other as wholeheartedly as Jesus Christ cherishes us – warts and all. Our egos have intervened.

Those of us who were privileged to know some of the older Nashdom monks like Dom Godfrey, Dom Anthony and Dom Augustine, had inspiring living examples to prove to us that this often humdrum, repetitive and on the surface frustrating and sometimes unsatisfying life was a life which could lead ultimately to the unsearchable depths of God.

Who knows then, if we had responded to Gods call to love more wholeheartedly, whether one or two or more of those who left might have found Elmore a place where they could flourish.

Whilst I think it is not unreasonable to leave a house with an Oratory that was built just 15 years ago and a refectory that was built just 9 years ago with a sense of failure, we nonetheless have an immense amount to thank God for in our time at Elmore. Today's Gospel speaks of God searching out the lost sheep and bringing home the stray. During our time here a number of our guests and visitors have come to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and sought baptism, and many have found a faith that had grown cold or disillusioned joyously renewed, and this has at least in part been a result of the ministry of prayer and hospitality here at Elmore.

We have formed many sustained friendships during our time here and we hope these friendships will continue after our move to Salisbury. We have played a part in accompanying people on a spiritual journey that has led some

of them to ordination to the priesthood or to entering another religious community. On the whole our community has shown a better side to our guests, visitors and friends than we have sometimes managed to find for each other.

As Christians we all have a ministry of prayer, and as monks this ministry is at the heart of our vocation, and none of us really know what God had done through our prayers. If we give someone a cake or a kind word we can see with our own eyes if we have made them happy. If we pray for them it is a matter of faith that God has been at work in our prayers. And yet over the years we have received many, many letters of thanks for prayers and many reports of unexpected and extra ordinary recoveries from illnesses that have been a great encouragement to us in preserving in what is ultimately a life of faith.

When our community had several priests we helped people to large extent through their spiritual council and sacramental ministry. We perhaps felt that we were the ministers, others the ministered to. As we have grown smaller and more vulnerable so more and more we have depended on the kind help of others. Sometimes it seems as if you only have to stand looking helpless with a hammer in your hand for an angel in disguise to appear. We are immensely grateful to all who have helped us in recent times. Without them, without you, we wouldn't have been able to stay here these last few years. I am very grateful as well to Dom Bruce for his role in organising our band of volunteers also in helping with the community service workers who have been such a feature of our weekends.

And so, whilst we leave here with some sorrow and regret let us be thankful and rejoice, as I believe Jesus Christ rejoices for what has been achieved by Him here. Human institutions within the church may grow and have their time and then decline, but through these institutions God is realising his Kingdom, and the Kingdom of God is forever growing as one by one Jesus seeks out his lost sheep, rejoicing as he finds them, bringing them safely to their true home.