

Tuesday Reflection 24 August 2021

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of St Bartholomew, about whom very little is known. Fortuitously, the 24th of August also marks the anniversary of the death of Ronald Knox (1888-1957), about whom, understandably, far more is known.

On my desk I have a copy of *The Holy Bible. A Translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*, the translation being by Ronald Knox, produced at the request of the Hierarchy of England and Wales to replace the Challoner revision (1749-1777) of the Douay-Rheims Bible (1582-1609) which had accompanied English Catholics for some 200 years.

It is perhaps foolhardy in such a short piece to attempt an appreciation of a man who, as well as being an accomplished translator - apart from the Bible, his works included translations of *The Imitation of Christ* and Therese of Lisieux' *The Story of a Saint* - also wrote detective fiction (a talent which perhaps helped in his work in military intelligence in the First World War) and maintained a steady stream of apologetic and evangelising writings.

The initial stations of his life followed those of the bright - and not so bright - sons of privileged families, taking him from the parental home (his father was an Anglican clergyman who was to become Bishop of Manchester) to Eton and Balliol College Oxford. There he developed into a formidable classicist, who seemed to have a monopoly on any prizes going. On graduating, he was elected a Fellow of Trinity College. In 1912 he was ordained in the Church of England and appointed Chaplain to Trinity College. So far so good - he was obviously cut out for higher things, but not in the way one might have expected.

During this time, Knox was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Anglican Church, and in 1917 he converted to the Catholic faith - whereupon he was disinherited by his father.

The next thirty years were a time of great activity; Knox was much in demand as a preacher, writer, broadcaster and retreat-giver. He had a special mission towards young people, and from 1926 to 1939 was Catholic Chaplain to the University of Oxford. The following years were dominated by his translation of the Bible, but he still maintained a steady output of works expounding the Catholic faith.

In 1957 he was diagnosed with an incurable cancer - during time spent in London consulting specialists, he was put up by an old Etonian friend, Harold Macmillan, in No. 10 Downing Street.

Ronald Knox was born with more than a silver spoon in his mouth, but, unlike many with his background, he put his gifts in the service of a higher power, not concerned with maintaining his privilege but realising that it is more blessed to serve than to be served.

Traditionally there have been three main constituencies within English Catholicism - the recusant Old Catholic families, the immigrants - originally principally Irish, but now far more cosmopolitan - and the converts; it is within this last group in which we find many intellectuals - starting perhaps with John Henry Newman - that Ronald Knox can be located, as one of those who did much to lead the Catholic Revival in this country and make Catholicism socially acceptable.

Michael Townson