

## **Battered Newman**

While I was Vicar of Newman's Church in Oxford, I remember we had an ecumenical celebration of his life. For the wonderful thing is that, although in the past, Newman could be a divisive figure, now Christians of all brands are able to come together to celebrate him. He is seen as God's gift to us all. After this service I remember that the late Duke of Norfolk and a Scottish Piper led us in procession from the Church to Trinity College where Newman had been a student. There we had a grand dinner at which there were, not only speeches, but also what was advertised as the 'World Premiere of Newman's Violin Sonata'. It was not great music but, in the style of Arthur Sullivan, a jaunty and cheerful enough piece.

I mention this burst of jollity because a lot of Newman's life was far from jolly. For him neither life in the Church of England nor in the Catholic Church proved to be a bed of roses. During his time at St Mary's he came to believe that he was called by God to uproot himself from his beloved Oxford and from the beloved church of his baptism and childhood. God was calling him, not to reject that past and the many good things it had given him, but to go forward, to leave what was familiar and plunge into a strange land. It was a deeply painful experience.

When he landed up in his new spiritual home the truth is that, until those final years of great old age, he never really felt at home. 'O how forlorn and dreary', he once cried 'has been my course since I have been a Catholic!' Often, as he puts it in his great poem, the night seemed dark and he was 'far from home.' If he had known conflict in the Church of England he was to find as much if not more in the Catholic Church. Many Catholics were suspicious of him. They found his way of doing theology unfamiliar. There were zealous 'super-Catholics' like William Ward who craved a papal edict at breakfast every day with his copy of *The Times*. They found Newman's quiet moderation disappointingly tepid. He was formally denounced to Rome and judged by Monsignor Talbot the Papal Chamberlain, to be: 'the most dangerous man in England.' Projects that he was encouraged to embark upon; the setting up of a Catholic university in Dublin or establishing a new Oratory in Oxford were hindered, undermined or blocked by those who should have been his new friends and allies. Newman's journey was no comfortable saunter through a smiling countryside but, as he put it: 'o'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent'.

It was not surprising that Newman felt this rejection and entered a time of deep depression. 'I am nobody', he wrote 'I have no friend at Rome. I have laboured in England, to be misrepresented, backbitten and scorned. I have laboured in Ireland, with a door ever shut in my face. I seem to have had many failures.' The old enemy failure hung over him again. Everything, he said: 'seemed to be crumbling under his hands.' But through all this darkness, two things sustained Newman. First, a sturdy acceptance of the reality of church life, of the earthiness of the containers in which the divine treasure is carried. To come into the Catholic Church, he wrote, was: 'not to be sent to bed', but to find oneself plunged into something like one of those Birmingham factories in which through 'an incessant noisy process... the raw material of our human nature is

melted, refined and moulded.’ True faith, he affirmed: ‘is not shown here below in peace but rather in conflict.’

And the second thing that maintained him through these troubles was the conviction that ‘the kindly light’ kept him and still led him on. The hand of God was on him, to shape and mould him. Newman had a very personal understanding of the Providence of God. It meant that he, like every other individual, was created: ‘to do something, to be something for which no one else is created.’ So he would steal away to know again the presence of that Craftsman Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. One friend’s last glimpse of him was on Good Friday 1890 as he knelt there, face in hands, before the Altar of Repose. But Newman would also steal away with his old violin, perhaps to play that jaunty sonata and so witness to the joy, which kept breaking through.

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