

A plague on both your houses. The words of Shakespeare's Mercutio as he fell, fatally wounded in the crossfire between the families of Juliet and her Romeo. Mercutio's understandably grumpy sentiment may well represent the thoughts of those here present who do not belong to Barlow or Roberts houses, gathered as we are to celebrate **their** patrons, St John Roberts and St Ambrose Barlow. What does this Mass have to do with me when I belong to Smythe, Caverel, Isabella or Powell houses?

It is true to say that of everyone connected with Downside in the last 5 centuries, St John and St Ambrose are the most celebrated. What a wonderful realisation that two of the monks of this Community were declared saints by the Church. They inspire us day in and day out. Their names live on in this place. They show us the path to greatness, through their faith, hope and love. A greatness found not before heaven, a paradise won for them by the sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

I've always thought Roberts and Barlow to be very different men. Roberts a young, impetuous, passionate Welsh firebrand, to Barlow's steady northern pragmatism. It is said that St John Roberts kept cheerful in all circumstances; even when in prison awaiting death as a punishment for being a Catholic priest. Barlow knew his work to be vital, giving the sacraments with caution, biding his time, until he was caught in the act, arrested in the middle of Mass. Imprisoned and sentenced, Barlow followed his Benedictine brother St John Roberts in making the ultimate sacrifice. For both men, Christ was at the centre.

Today, I ought to have started this homily with the words: blessings on all your houses. Unlike the divided and volatile Verona of Shakespeare's time, the Monks of St Gregory's in continental Europe were of one body, one spirit in Christ. They formed one household of God, following the rule of their Holy Father St Benedict. That was vital to the two monks whose special day it is. Following a rule is so different to sticking to a rule book. The Rule of Benedict is followed for the greater good of the community, to which Roberts and Barlow belonged. The Holy Rule is not like the highway code for example; it is about cultivating virtue and personal growth, growing in love and consideration for the other. Rules and a rule are subtly different things. A rule of life is chosen, rules imposed. These two saintly sons of St Benedict chose their path. Anyone privileged enough to be part of the Downside community is blessed by them. And all the people who live on in the names of our houses, loved the Community of St Gregory, helped them, prayed for them, were proud of them.

To try and explain why a girl of Isabella or Caverel houses should celebrate Barlow and Roberts' day, or why a Smythe or Powell boy ought to do so, let's imagine a dinner party. At this party, all the house

patrons are invited, plus you. Like one of those odd questions we are sometimes asked to imagine: who would you invite to your dream dinner party? Well today, 9th October, I would love to lunch with Barlow and Roberts, Powell and Smythe, Isabella and Caverel. *Déjeuner a sept*. There is something deeply unifying about sharing a meal. Abbot Philip de Caverel would provide hospitality and a venue at his monastery. As Abbot he'd arrange for the monastery's cellarer to bring out the best wine. The only woman present would be Isabella, making the occasion immediately more civilised. The nobility and fragrance of the Infanta Isabella would lift the occasion into a convivial royal visit, and bring variety given that all but two of the house patrons were monks (with questionable personal hygiene in the 17th century. One would hope that Philip Powell and John Roberts would not break into the Welsh language, given their birth places; French would be more polite than English if we're Abbot Caverel's guests. And Barlow, a northerner, would provide the wise voice of experience, a straightforward man who got on with his priestly mission. Barlow picked up some French in the early part of the 208 years the Community lived over the English Channel in Douai, France. By 'eck Barlow was good company and a wise interlocutor in every circumstance. Edward Smythe would be present, the most famous OG of all time having studied with the monks in Douai. He picked up the Benedictine values and invited the exiled monks into his own home. Smythe's House in Acton Burnell, the only house at that time. Of course Abbot Caverel would say grace at the meal. And perhaps the Welsh guests could be encouraged to sing after dinner.

We're one family as a School. Our patronal family including your house patron all loved the Community of St Gregory the Great. The Benedictine monks were English or Welsh, but had to start up in France at a time of persecution for Catholics. At the imagined dinner party, conversation would have included thoughts of mission and the conversion of England; a cause for which Roberts, Barlow and Powell were willing to lay down their lives.

The first reading tells us: *their hope was rich with immortality... great will their blessings be*. The second that: *hope is not deceptive... that hope has been poured into our heart by the Holy Spirit*. Jesus says in the gospel: *if anyone is ashamed of me and of my words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his own glory*. Barlow and Roberts knew no shame. They were proud to be children of God. Christ's message to us today: be proud to be a follower of His. Speak of him well. Pray often. Be courageous witnesses. It is what Roberts and Barlow would have wanted. Now, our brothers in Christ have moved on to another dinner engagement, to the wedding feast of the Lamb in heaven.