

Requiem Mass for Dame Anne Bromwich Colwich Abbey 7th July 2016

Today, our Requiem Mass for Dame Anne has been blessed with three readings from the New Testament, two from the writings of St Paul and one from the Gospel of St John. All three speak of the gift and joy of eternal life in God's presence that Christ came into this world to bestow upon us, if we but have faith in him.

St John sees eternal life as beginning in this world, from the very moment we turn to him and open our hearts to his grace. In fact, Jesus asks the Father in his High Priestly Prayer, "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am. I have made your name known to them, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them." As a committed Christian and a faithful Catholic, Dame Anne was given to Christ both by her parents and by her heavenly Father when she was baptised. She confirmed that gift of herself, when she entered monastic life and eventually made her Solemn Vows here at St Mary's Abbey, Colwich, as a Benedictine nun. So we can be confident that where Christ is, she will be there with him, at the Father's right hand.

St Paul, writing in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, and this is the first book in the New Testament ever to be written, says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that it will be the same for those who have died in Jesus: God will bring them with him." We die, like all creatures do, and often death is accompanied by suffering and pain. Dame Anne was not spared that final agony where life and death contend for our souls, but Mother Abbess and the sisters were at her side praying with her, so that her passing from this life was free from the stress of being alone in a hospital bed far from her community and the place she loved so much.

In his great Letter to the Romans, St Paul writes that, "The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord." How true those words are of Dame Anne, who lived and breathed her faith, her love of God, an overflowing, joyful and practical love she shared with all she met, but above all with her beloved family and with her monastic community. Her life was one of genuine witness to the love of God, the "perfect love which casts out all fear," which St Benedict speaks of in the Holy Rule in the Chapter on Humility. That greatest of Christian and monastic virtues, humility, lay at the heart of Dame Anne's life of faith and it struck and influenced us all. We thank God for her life and for her death.



Dame Anne was born Marjorie Bromwich in Birmingham on 17th October 1931, the youngest of ten children, of whom eight survived infancy. While she was still young, the family moved to Northampton, where she won a scholarship to Notre Dame High School. Here she studied from 1943 to 1948 together with her best friend Josie Sear. They have remained close friends to this day. Josie writes, "Marjorie taught me to swim, but above all she was a talented singer and I have cherished memories of singing with her in the "unseen" school choir, especially during the annual Nativity play. She also excelled in Latin far more than I did. It was always a great joy later in life to visit Dame Anne and the Community at Colwich, to show her pictures of our growing family, some of whom she had known as children."

After school, Marjorie wanted to join the Medical Missionaries of Mary, but for that she needed some initial training and experience. This led her to find a post in the pathology department at Northampton General Hospital. She soon realised, however, that nursing was not for her, feeling a strong call to the contemplative life. So she tried her vocation with the Cistercian nuns at Stapehill in Dorset, but she soon discovered that this was not really what she was looking for. It was her parish priest at St Gregory's, Dom Eric Phillips, a monk of Downside, who suggested that she might try Colwich. Try she did and found this to be the right place and here she is

with us today in choir, where she always loved to be. She entered as a postulant in April 1955 and was clothed six months' later by Abbess Maurus Hansom and given the name Anne, her feast day being 26th July, that of SS. Joachim and Anne, parents of the Virgin Mary. A year later she made her Simple Profession and on 22nd October 1959 her Solemn Profession. At her passing, she had been a nun for over 60 years.

In the course of her monastic life, Dame Anne held many positions: sacristan, cook, infirmarian, novice mistress and prioress, some of them simultaneously. She loved working in the garden, made the most exquisite meringues and had the most beautiful voice. She will be sadly missed in every department of the monastery. As a postulant, she had helped in the infirmary and sat with sick sisters, often during the night. Until five weeks' ago, she was still acting as infirmarian and helping to look after Mother Gertrude. St Benedict says that the care of the sick is one of the most important aspects of our life in community. Dame Anne was a great example to us all of how we should love and care for our sick brethren. She was also a woman of prayer, not only being regular at all the hours of prayer and sustaining the Divine Office with her true and perfect voice, but also in the practice of mental prayer, that glorious heritage of the English Benedictine Congregation and the traditional way of the nuns of Colwich.

Dame Anne was appointed Prioress in 1982 with the election of Dame Edith Street as Abbess. She continued to hold this office under Abbess Gertrude and again under Abbess Davina. She also held the office of Novice Mistress over the same period, the present abbess being one of her novices. Dame Anne was an exceptionally reliable person, someone you could trust and depend upon. Mother Davina has enjoyed her support and friendship to the very end.

Above I mentioned her family, to whom she was very close. It is mistakenly thought, that when we enter a monastery to become a Benedictine, we have to give up our parents and our brothers and sisters, but the very opposite is true. Our families become closely associated with the monastery and part of the fabric of our community. Dame Anne had many nieces and nephews, including greats and great greats, some of whom are with us this afternoon. Our condolences go out to you all, yet, as St Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Those who have died with Christ will be the first to rise, then those who are still alive. So we shall stay with the Lord for ever. With such thoughts as these you should comfort one another."

Mother Abbess has suggested that you might like to hear the words spoken by Fr Jeremy in his homily the morning after Dame Anne died.

"Blessed are you, Father, for revealing the mysteries of the kingdom to mere children."

On 29th June, the Lord called Dame Anne from this world into his presence. On my return from Yorkshire at 9pm, Mother Abbess asked me to anoint Dame Anne once more, which I did immediately. The sacrament, in these circumstances, includes absolution and an indulgence. At that moment it was as if Jesus was saying directly to her what he said to the paralytic in the gospel, "Courage, my child, your sins are forgiven."

On the great feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Community said Compline in the infirmary, around Dame Anne's bed. The monastic family was united in prayer and the Prioress among them one last time. Norah, who had been sitting for parts of the day with her, was also there and so was I, but most importantly Christ was there, holding her hand, as I imagined it, as Mother Abbess held the other. Mother Davina and Trudi, who has generously been watching through these recent nights with Dame Anne, remained praying with her, until the Lord came to collect his child around 10.30pm.

She spent so many decades seeking God, but today she seeks no longer, because nobody seeks who has already found. She lived by Christian hope all her life but today she hopes no longer, because nobody hopes for what they already possess. But let us, who still seek and hope, do so with renewed commitment and unshakeable faith as we pray for her with love:

*Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord,
And let perpetual light shine upon her.
May she rest in peace. Amen.*