

## **“God is here comen to us. That is the news!”**

*A good companion for Lent, suggests Fr Jonathan Beswick*

So whispers the woman mystic, Malle, whose visions witness to the shimmering theological thread that runs steadfastly through HFM Prescott's book *The Man on a Donkey*. “God is here comen to us. That is the news!” is her response to the seemingly more urgent and immediate political news of the autumn of 1536, running like wildfire through the north country: namely, that the people are rising up in protest at the destructive enormities of Henry VIII. It is a remarkable telling of the story of the Pilgrimage of Grace, drawing on and freely quoting from a wealth of primary sources. It is also a book that offers much food for thought for the modern Christian reader, as we are confronted, page by page, with our own family history. The title is derived from one of Malle's visions, in which Christ is crossing the bridge over a local river, riding on a donkey.

In an introductory note Prescott usefully defines the *chronicle* form of her writing: it is, she says, “an attempt to introduce the reader into a world, rather than at first present him with a narrative.” And herein lies the key to Prescott's genius: the very nature of her writing is, in itself, a setting forth of a quintessentially English theological method. It is pastoral, nuanced, humane and moderate. It requires patience and frustrates the hasty. The reader “learns....without knowing that he learns.” It is no great dogmatic system, nor one that admits rigorist legal definitions: rather, she invites us into a gently bucolic schoolroom and makes of us apprentices in the tragic story of the Pilgrimage of Grace. Her descriptive powers, for me, rival those of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. She paints with great skill and beauty the contours of the English landscape and does likewise with the contours of the English heart.

As we enter the world of *The Man on a Donkey* we find ourselves being steeped in the complex political, social and religious world of 1530s England. Prescott handles the tensions of this time with remarkable even-handedness, tenderly opening-up the rival loyalties at work within the principal players. Then, in the midst of the many tangled webs of intrigue and cloistered worldly-ambition, we are suddenly encountered by the Christ himself. It is almost exactly the central chapter of the book, and I suspect this is no accident. Immediately I twice reread the chapter in question, with a mixture of disbelief and excitement.

In this chapter it is late-March and the men have been working in the fields at Marrick Priory (the soon-to-be-suppressed religious house around which much of the story revolves). They come in to the kitchen for refreshment and there is a man (in fact it is *the Man* of the title of the book) with them who is yet unknown: “black, shaggy-haired” and “of not much more than thirty by his look, but with lines bitten into his face by hunger, or sorrow, or by some stress beyond the common lot.” The worldly Prioress is watching proceedings, disapprovingly, from her window and describes him as “an ugly vagabond knave”, wondering if he is a shepherd from over the hill where “folk are very poor and wild.” Malle and her simple friend Wat (the unloved, bastard son of the local parish priest) recognize and follow “the Man” with their hearts bursting for joy, and there follows a Gospel-like scene of them together on the hillside: at once bleak, pre-Springtime Yorkshire and yet also unseasonably “golden harvest weather” where the ears of corn are full.

It is in this central, mystical moment that Prescott reveals the full depth of her own faith and theological understanding. It is absolutely enthralling. The Chalcedonian definition is deftly untangled for the reader in the simplest, homeliest prose: "For God, that was too great to be holden even of everywhere and forever, had bound Himself into the narrow room of here and now. He that was in all things had, for pity, prisoned Himself in flesh and in simple bread. He that thought winds, waters and stars, had made of Himself a dying man." She later develops the theme: "And it wasn't that He put on man like a jacket to take off at night, or to bathe or to play. But man He was, as man is man, the Maker made Himself the made; God was un-Godded by His own hand." On several occasions Malle is put under some pressure to allow a political purpose or meaning to be attached to her visions: she won't permit it and simply replies with the haunting refrain: "There was a great wind of light blowing and sore pain." What more is there to say?

*The Man on a Donkey* was first published, in two volumes, in 1952. It was republished in 2016, in a single-volume paperback. It is 700 pages long and, at two and a quarter inches thick, presents quite a logistical challenge when trying to fit it into a shoulder-bag (I had to cut my copy in half, in order to squeeze it into my panniers for a recent pilgrimage to Assisi).

It is a marvellous read, with an enlightening introduction by John Cooper (a former parishioner of St Barnabas) of York University. It is both deeply moving and encouraging and it has caused me to reconsider some of my own dormant assumptions about the turbulence and destruction of the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century. I suppose I would describe it as a very *Christian* work-discreetly apologetic in the most accessible way. Eamon Duffy describes it as a "largely forgotten masterpiece", Hilary Mantel as "a classic of historical fiction" (which, I feel, rather misses the point-but then I have to confess to being a dissenter on the subject of *Wolf Hall*...) and the only attributed reference I could find was in an essay by Rowan Williams, in the *Oxford Handbook of Christology*. Which is really where it belongs: a great work of English pastoral Christology that, at 18 pages a day, would be the perfect companion for your Lenten journey.

(*The Man on a Donkey* by H.F.M. Prescott is published by Apollo, £10.)