



## John Bradburne's Journey

### “Is this the way you want me to pray?”

Bound by the hands and held at gunpoint, John Bradburne addressed this question to the guerrillas who had taken him from his hut in the leper settlement of Mutemwa in Mashonaland, northern Zimbabwe. It was the night of September 2, 1979, the murderous height of the Zimbabwean Civil War, and the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army had come to abduct and kill an alleged informer. The pretext on which they coaxed him from the hut was that they wished to pray with him. What followed was a three-day ordeal marked by threats, intimidation, and humiliation. By the night of September 5 John Bradburne had been shot dead by the guerrillas and his body left stripped and abandoned at the side of a road.

Advocates of his cause for sainthood claim that John Bradburne's death was martyrdom: a life freely given for the least of these among us, his friends the lepers whom he loved with the love of Christ. And if it is indeed martyrdom, then everything which it can teach the Church about sanctity is contained in that one question John put to his captors: “Is this the way you ask me to pray?”

I discovered John Bradburne late last year through a doorstop-sized biography given as a gift to the Dominican convent to which I belong. Our community observes the monastic tradition of reading at meals; each suppertime, one of us will read aloud from a spiritual work while the rest eat and listen in silence. As none of the sisters knew much about John Bradburne, it seemed a good idea for us all to learn together by making this biography our next table book.

As any religious will tell you, there is an art to choosing table books. Embarking on something long is always a risky undertaking—if a slim volume turns out to be dire, at least it's only a month or so until we can move on to something else—and with John



Bradburne the risk did not, at first, seem to have paid off. For the first few weeks of reading, the sisters were all silently peeling their oranges and buttering their bread with an air of palpable scepticism. “I suppose it's quite encouraging, really,” one whispered to me after a particularly testing evening. “After all, if this man can become a saint, then truly anybody can.”

Bradburne's life certainly invites wonder at the sheer universality of God's gift of sanctity—but it might also invite incredulity. Thomas gave us a Summa and Therese a Little Way; John Bradburne busked with a recorder on the streets of London, spent a year living in an Italian organ loft, and at times seemed more at home with his bees and adopted birds than with other human beings. He wrote poems that are bewildering in their volume and, occasionally, a lit-

tle bizarre in their content.

But what prompted my sister's observation was the fact that Bradburne never found a fixed and permanent state of life as the Church defines it. Instead, he swerved rapidly from one attempt at stability to another: a few months as a Carthusian, a few months as a Benedictine, a stab at being a hermit; one year in the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion, sixteen years of wandering and semi-employment in Europe and the Holy Land. Something in him seemed deeply, almost viscerally averse to settling. Whenever and wherever he came close to putting down firm roots, he would be off again with a speed and unpredictability that at times almost appears comic—and, though she did not know it, when my sister poked gentle fun at John's sanctity she was echoing the sentiments of Bradburne himself, who wrote to his friend Father John Dove in 1952: “pray on for my sanctification too, because it would encourage so many souls if such a wreckage might come to canonisation.”

Moving, searching, flitting—perhaps escaping; for like many things that at first sight appear comic, there is something uncomfortable, even painful, to be uncovered deeper down in John Bradburne's protracted search for his place in the world, his search for God.

Born in Cumbria in 1921, the son of an Anglican clergyman, Bradburne enlisted in the Indian Army at the outbreak of the Second World War and served in Burma and British Malaya in the 9th Gurkha Rifles. It was one of the defining experiences of his life. Before his twenty-first birthday, John had known vicious combat, starvation, shipwreck, and severe illness, and had come close to dying on several occasions. He was commended to receive the Military Cross for his service and relinquished his place in the Rifles on grounds of ill health in 1946. It was in Malaya that he under-

went a conversion to Christ that would eventually lead him to be received into the Catholic Church at the age of twenty-six in Buckfast Abbey.

Bradburne's time in the army marked him profoundly: the inescapable sight of death and human suffering, extended periods of fear, the sheer and devastating accumulation of experiences that are near-impossible to make sense of or to process—and, most crucially, to forget—would have been formative for a person of any age, let alone one so young. That he would find God in the midst of all this is, in the Catholic view of the world, both an utter mystery and not a surprise. After all, having set his face to Jerusalem, why would he not find Christ there?

But it is, I hope, not too much of an intrusion into Bradburne's interior life to suggest that his experiences of war did not necessarily mark him for the better. There are times when his erratic flight from one short-lived home to another suggest that this questing spiritual pilgrim was spurred on—at least in part, and even then unconsciously—by the wounds of war: wounds that God could use to his purposes even as he sought to heal Bradburne of their misery.

He eventually found a spiritual home of sorts in the Third Order of St. Francis, which he joined in 1956 at the age of thirty-five. But it was thirteen years later before he found a home both physical and spiritual, when he travelled to Africa—to find “a cave to pray in”, as he put it to Father John Dove—and took a job as warden at Mutemwa, living among his beloved leper friends in a small hut. “This”, he wrote in the *Rhodesia Herald*, “is my journey's end”.

No wedding, no final profession, no ordination for John Bradburne. His life is a salutary lesson for those who fear that they will never find sanctity outside of marriage or the monastery. But that lesson would remain a cheap consolation if John's earlier failures to find a settled way of life did not serve to order our attention to the final and definitive hour of his death, stripped of those signs of vocation that can become, for many Christians, the objects of well-intentioned but still unhealthy fixation: the ring, the habit, the mark of priestly character.

“Is this the way you ask me to pray?”

It is a guileless, perhaps even naïve question of a condemned man to his captors. But it is also the question lying at the silent depths of any call from God. It goes beyond wedding dates and seminary interview panels and convent come-and-see weekends. It



is the question of Gethsemane, the question of the cup that will not pass, and all of us must ask it—not only at the hour of our death, but the hour of the tiny, myriad, often unnoticed deaths-to-self that precede it. Is this how I am to serve you and to love you, Lord—here in this marriage, this parish, this career, this community; married to this person, caring for these children, living with these people? Is this, in short, the way you ask me to pray?

The search to answer the call of God can, for some of us, be a veiled search for an easy answer. Just think of how much will fall into place when I discover my state of life—when I can leave the vocational waiting-room and am set on the path to sanctity! It is only once the cloister doors shut behind us, or the wedding guests all pack up and go home, that we realise it is still perfectly possible to resist grace if we want to. At every moment of the Christian life, including in marriage, priesthood or religious consecration, the human person remains a mystery to itself, and so does the Cross—and if we do not wish to embrace that mystery, then God will not force us to. Amongst the responsibilities of married life, of the cloister, of the parish, it is still possible to interiorly turn away from that Cross, to choose to veil the face of Christ, and to spurn the hand, pierced for our sins, that He holds out to us in every circumstance of each day. It is perfectly possible, we discover, to live out our state of life on a rigidly and resolutely superficial level: to

merely do what we have to do and grow no closer to God in the process, to busy ourselves with the externals and never on the deeper call to learn to love as Christ loves.

Every state of Christian life exists to conform us to Christ the crucified. For some, this conformity will come through the priesthood or the religious life; for most, it will come through married life. Then there will be those, like John Bradburne, for whom it is none of the above. Their stories, so abundant in signs of sanctity and yet so markedly different to that of a religious, a priest or a married person, can, if we let them, reveal to us the bare and unadorned heart of sainthood. They can show us with sharp and convicting clarity the shared goal, the shared purpose, towards which we are all moving.

In a talk given at Mutemwa in 1996, Father John Dove remarked that his friend's martyrdom began long before his actual death. It was not merely a comment on the privations of Bradburne's everyday life, the lack of food, sleep, and comfort which he experienced in his hut. Bradburne did not merely put up with these privations as part and parcel of his position as Mutemwa's warden but took them upon himself intentionally and explicitly for the sake of being close to the lepers. It was so that he, like Christ, could be close to those who suffered, and in doing so find that same Christ within them.

On his return from his first ever visit to the Mutemwa settlement in March 1969, Brad-

burne wrote a poem in which he said: “Lepers warmly to treat as human beings / Is easy to the theorist afar.” It was “poetic justice”, he claimed, that someone who had “treated human beings much as lepers” in his desire for independence and solitude should be healed of his lack of love precisely through serving in a leper settlement. It was not long before the residents of Mutemwa were referring to Bradburne as Baba—Father. This is the white martyrdom: the turning towards Christ that entails a death not of the physical body but a death to one’s interior selfishness, self-regard, pride.

The vision of Christ that John Bradburne found in his leper friends was not a saccharine or condescending one. At Mutemwa, to paraphrase the Prophet Zechariah, he looked upon the one whom he had pierced. He found Christ the outcast, Christ the scourged and rejected, who spared himself no pain or anguish in his divine mission to draw close to us, the creatures whom He loves. Bradburne set himself to reforming Mutemwa, providing the physical and spiritual care to his “flock of eighty”, as his poem describes them, and protecting them from exploitation and ill-treatment. He spent four years as warden followed by a further six living on the outskirts of

the community, continuing his care for his friends after he was unjustly relieved of his duties—having fallen foul of Mutemwa’s directors for, among other things, giving the lepers adequate food rations and refusing to make them wear number tags. The threat of violence posed by nationalist guerrillas steadily increased, but all efforts to persuade Bradburne to leave Mutemwa for his own safety were rebutted—occasionally a little frivolously. As he wrote to a friend in 1977: “but why would they waste a bullet on a clown?”

This life, in this place, was how he was being asked to pray. After ten years of service to Mutemwa, so attuned was Bradburne to the presence of God in the most wretched and frightening of conditions that, as he was being marched through the caves of Mashonaland in the course of his abduction, he noticed a crude etching of Christ on the rock wall and fell to his knees in worship before it. There was nowhere now where Christ was not present to him, calling him to pray, to love and to trust—whether in the residents of a leper settlement or among the men who would soon murder him.

Flannery O’Connor—another, albeit better-known literary Catholic—once

wrote that the key creative act of a Christian is to prepare for a good death. Our great act of co-creation with God is to reach the point where we can commend our spirit into the hand of the Lord without doubt, fear or resistance, and turn towards His face in peace.

The death of John Bradburne, violent and humiliating though it was, shows us what such a death entails. Bradburne’s journey to God—a journey that from the outside seemed erratic, formless, even futile—was unveiled for what it truly was in the harsh and shocking crucible of that night at Mutemwa, the night where he was pulled from his hut by an armed band of militiamen and asked them if this was the way he was to pray. It was a question he had been asking every day since first discovering Christ on the battlefields of the Second World War, and a question that led him, after a journey of many years, into the arms of God. It is the same question we ask, in whatever life we have been given, if we hope to follow him.

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