

Canonisation of St Jeanne Jugan

Mass at St Joseph's Headingley
Sunday, 11 October 2009

In preparation for this celebration I thought I ought to find out something more about Jeanne Jugan than I already knew – if I were to meet her in the street I would recognise her because of her familiar portrait, and I knew she is the foundress of the LSP, but more than that I would not have been able to say. In former days, which most of us will readily recall, we relied on the handy little CTS pamphlet to give us useful details about the person in question. Alas, though, so far as I can discover she is not honoured with a pamphlet! So I turned to the internet where all the information we might want and much more besides is readily to hand. At anyrate it enabled me to pick up the bones of her life easily enough.

She was born in 1792 when the Revolution in France was at its strongest, and she died in 1879 at the age of 87. Her early life was apparently unremarkable. Then one day an elderly sick woman who could no longer look after herself knocked on Jeanne's door. She immediately took her in and put the woman into her own bed. At that time she was not far off 50 years old herself. That was the beginning of her work.

Within a few years three other women had joined her and they formed themselves into an association which they called the Servants of the Poor. By this time there were around forty elderly women being cared for. The sisters chose Jeanne as their superior and elected her again the following year. However the local curate, who was their spiritual adviser, for whatever reason annulled the election and named one of the other sisters (I think she was the youngest) as superior. From that day onwards Jeanne had no official place in the affairs of the Congregation.

Despite being sidelined in this way, Jeanne, with the help and support of a number of influential and wealthy public figures in France, opened several houses, and was even awarded a prize by the French Academy. Why she was treated like this perhaps we will never really know, but she was apparently ignored by her own sisters to the extent that some years later the younger sisters had no idea that she was in reality the Foundress of the Congregation. She was never invited to a General Chapter. When she was in her mid sixties she was brought to the Mother House, and told to cease all external work except for collecting (a work which still continues). She took no part in the affairs of the Congregation. After a few years she was put to live in retirement with the novices – which she did for nearly 20 years, until in 1879, aged 87, she died. Such treatment is not unknown in the lives of the founders of religious congregations – indeed perhaps this is one of the best tests of an individual's holiness.

It is astonishing (if it's really true) that it was not until 20 years after her death that it became known within the Congregation that she was their Foundress. In passing it is interesting to note that she is being canonised at the same ceremony as Fr Damian of Molokai who gave his life to caring for lepers on a remote island in the Pacific; he was largely unknown, and died from the disease after many years' of hard and humble service. One of the slightly unexpected things we learn about her is that she left no writings (in contrast to Cardinal Newman who is shortly to be beatified – probably at a ceremony next year in this country). But there is a wealth of sayings and brief comments attributed to St Jeanne Jugan which are known. I want to select a few of these and reflect on them in the light of today's readings at Mass.

In the passage from Isaiah (58:6-11) we hear, we are invited to do what we can to free people from whatever might prevent them from seeing and knowing God. Such obstacles are often something very ordinary like sickness of mind or body or spirit. God's promise is very straight-forward: "Cry, and the Lord will answer; call, and he will say, 'I am here'." But, of course, God doesn't leave such things to chance, or perform an unexpected or miraculous event. He relies on us, he ensures that there are those who will take on the work themselves. Jeanne Jugan was one such person: she accepted the challenges that came her way and did whatever she could to respond to them. She once said: "When you are in the Homes, be kind to the elderly, especially to the infirm. Love them very much! Look upon the poor with compassion, and Jesus will look upon you with kindness. You must always be cheerful. Our elderly do not like long faces." My own knowledge here (and I speak with just a few weeks' experience of being a resident here myself) is that there is an awful lot of smiling – it's quite infectious. (I was once told that we use twice as many muscles to frown than we do to smile, so it's obviously a very sensible occupation!)

Towards the end of his life St John (1 John 3:14-18), so it is said, could speak of nothing except love. He urges me to show everyone true love; he stresses that if I close my heart to those in need then God's love simply couldn't be there within me. It's a challenging demand. It is something that affects all of us, though possibly in a particular way priests – how should we react to the importunate beggar? To someone in obvious need it's not so difficult, but the fellow who accosts you on your doorstep is a bit different (there are still a few regulars who knock on my door, and perhaps on the doors of the priests in Hinsley Court!). I wonder how Jeanne Jugan would have responded to such demands? I think any of us could guess. She said: "It is so beautiful to be poor, to have nothing, to depend on God for everything. God has given you a great grace in calling you to serve the poor. Refuse God nothing. You must do everything through love." So there are the regulars who come to Mount St Joseph's for sustenance, and I suspect they know that that

is what they will be given. And more than that, they know that what is given them is given with love, not begrudgingly. It is a good work. The key for her, as it should be for us, is to do everything out of love: freely, happily and cheerfully.

Our gospel reading was the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12). This is a superb reflection on the attitudes we should have towards one another. It is probably a bringing together of sayings of Jesus made at different times. You may know a film made in the 70's by Pasolini, an Italian who always declared himself to be an unbeliever. The story is that he was in Assisi and because of a big procession through the town was confined to his room for several hours. So in sheer boredom he picked up the Bible in his room and read St Matthew's Gospel. There is a power in reading a gospel at a sitting. He was so captivated by the person of Jesus that he made a film simply titled, *The Gospel According To St Matthew*. It was quite brilliant. One of the most powerful sections was the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. Jesus was portrayed at different locations, proclaiming these demanding, even provocative maxims, to a background of rainstorms, thunder and lightning. He spoke angrily, as if knowing that what he was proclaiming would be misrepresented, misunderstood, watered down, muddied and muddled. This recollection has always stayed with me and has reminded me that the teaching of the Beatitudes is absolutely central to right living. It is wholly appropriate that we should have listened to this wonderful part of the Gospel message. It is central to all that St Jeanne Jugan did in her life, and is the core of the work of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

It is impossible to pick out one of the Beatitudes as being *the* key of your vocation, but let me stress the first two of them because they are so apt for the work of the Little Sisters and for the life of the community at this and at all of the Houses of the Little Sisters throughout the world. These first two Beatitudes remind us that it is the poor in spirit, and the gentle who are specially blessed.

The poor in spirit are those who know and willingly accept that all they have is gift; Mary is the exemplar – she was specially blessed because she knew her own poverty, so in her song of rejoicing she praises God because he has seen the humility (or poverty) of his servant. Such a one was Jeanne Jugan.

Gentleness is an Old Testament virtue and is akin to meekness and humility. It is the strength of those who wholly accept God's guidance, knowing that everything can work together for good. The psalms are full of pointers as to how God regards the humble. The meek, humble and gentle person is open to all God's gifts, which are accepted with gratitude. Such a person is a dear friend of God, such a person was Jeanne Jugan.

This is indeed a great day for the whole family of the Little Sisters of the Poor throughout the world, and, of course, for those who are privileged to be

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in their Homes. St Jeanne Jugan herself surely continues to guide you all and your work so that you may more and more realise that you are instruments of God's work. You have a wonderful patroness who must be supremely happy that her work continues through you all.

+ *David Konstant, Bishop Emeritus of Leeds*