

**THE CARMELITE WAY OF LIFE:
COMMEMORATING THE RULE OF ST ALBERT**

Tony Lester is the Provincial of the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance England. With his kind permission, we are reproducing here the inspiring homily which he delivered in York Minster on May 5th, 2007, an international celebration of eight hundred years of the Carmelite Rule of St Albert and the Carmelite way of life. Also present at the event was Albert's successor as Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah.

TONY LESTER

We are here to give thanks to God, the faithful God, for eight hundred years of the Carmelite way of life. And that in a special way is symbolised by the presence with us of Patriarch Michel from Jerusalem. He is a visible link back to Albert of Jerusalem and that first *small* group of hermits on Mount Carmel, who would be mind-boggled if they could see us here now. Albert gave them the document that would become the Carmelite *Rule*.

Now it is a simple fact that we do not know when that meeting between Albert and those first hermits took place. We know that it was sometime during his time as Patriarch. Some of the Order's best historians are here today, and it has to be said that there has been not a little confusion and scratching of heads as to why 2007 was chosen to mark this anniversary.

I hope that they will forgive me if I suggest that, whilst the question about the exact date of the giving of the *Way of Life* has a value, it is neither the biggest nor the most important question we should be asking as members of the Carmelite family.

In the west, where most of us live, we have moved to a very literal idea of the understanding of history. We pick up a text and say: 'Is this true?' Then, if it is not *literally* true, we feel perhaps in some way betrayed; we put it down, it becomes worthless. There is, however, another question we could ask, that on a human level might be more helpful. It is a deeper question, and that question is: 'What does it mean?'

It is the question that the Jewish people would have brought to the scriptures: 'What does it mean?' It is the question our *Rule* invites us to bring to the scriptures when it invites us to *ponder the Law of the Lord, day and night*. The questions about meaning are the ones more likely to change our lives and they are, therefore, the most risky ones, not to say the most dangerous.

There are forty years between 1207 and 1247 when, after the first General Chapter of the Order, the brothers petitioned the Pope to approve their *Way of Life*. These forty years perhaps call to mind the forty years in the desert or the forty days' fasting by the Lord Jesus in the desert at the beginning of his ministry. These forty years had seen a move from the *holy place*, Mount Carmel, to a very different context. They were very risky years as the brothers fled the violence and left Mount Carmel to come to Europe. There was a real risk of extinction, and extinction would probably have been the

result – had not another journey taken place. And that, perhaps, for those of us here in York who are familiar with the geography of this city is symbolised by the move the friars made from the Horsefair (site of the first foundation in 1250) to Fossgate (1295). For those not fortunate to know where the Horsefair or Fossgate is the Horsefair is outside the city and Fossgate is right in the middle. It is a move from the edges to the centre.

Mount Carmel, in Carmelite terms, had ceased to be a mountain in Palestine. It had become, in those forty years, a place in the *heart* – whose ascent is precisely the journey inwards, from the edges of our lives to the centre. But what does this mean?

As Christian people, we only ever look back to see the way forward. There never was a never-never-land of Carmelite perfection we can get back to. No: I would suggest that the way lies forward from here, not backwards; we need to look forwards into an uncertain future. The question, ‘What does it mean – what does the Carmelite story mean?’, is ours today. We need to ask that question. And the choices before us are real, and the risks are real. Having eight hundred years of history is no guarantee of getting things right. I would, though, like to suggest a possible way forward for us.

I believe that we are living in a time of great grace, and I believe that future generations will look back on our day and regret that they were not alive now. That’s not a view commonly held. The church that most of us have known certainly seems to be dying, if we call ‘church’ our *structures*. These carefully constructed structures are crumbling and will probably, in the lifetime of many of us here, collapse under their own weight.

At the moment, our response as church is a little like the plate-spinners we used to see on television on Sunday afternoons: first one plate then another, then ten, then twenty spinning, and then they would dash around trying to keep all these plates moving. Priests with one, two, three, four, five parishes in their care, and many more down the line. Death of structures is on the horizon, and it is not disloyal to suggest that this might be so. In the words of Oscar Romero of El Salvador: *as Christians we do not believe in death without resurrection!*

God is, I believe, doing for us something we would never do for ourselves. There is too much security in our structures, too much safety from real questions in our denominational certainties, that we would never begin to ask if left to ourselves.

It is too early to see the beautiful thing that God is building. We are perhaps in the darkness before dawn, but God is creating a new way of being church. And we have the opportunity, are graced with the possibility, of sowing the seeds of that new church – even though we may not live to see them come to full flower.

Now it ill behoves me as a Carmelite, on such a great Carmelite day, to quote a Jesuit! But Karl Rahner once famously said that *the Christian of the future will be a contemplative or not at all*. The symbolic move from the mountain to the heart, from the edges to the centre, from running away from ourselves (as we do so well) to the journey inwards, is one that each generation has to make.

Our spirituality as Carmelites gives us a language and symbols to speak to a world and even to a church whose gods might be dying. We can interpret the dark night, hearing in the darkness the gentle whistle of the shepherd; and as we do so, we are sowing seeds.

Our vision of the essential goodness of each person was echoed by the Patriarch in those strong words of the goodness of every Christian, Muslim and Jew, every child of God. Our vision that there is no such thing as a person from whom the Spirit of God is absent can lead us to *include*, when perhaps society and even church exclude; and as we include, so we are sowing seeds – seeds for a harvest which God will bring to maturity when perhaps we are long gone.

We need faith to interpret the signs of the times, and we need love to keep trusting. Looking back eight hundred years should serve to spur us on, to move us forwards: not for another eight hundred years but simply into God's future, where hopefully not just the walls between Christians but perhaps also the higher ones – the walls between Carmelites – might eventually crumble and disappear.

In preparing this homily, I looked for a word which might shed some light on the next stage of the journey for us; I was looking for a contemporary word. There are many Carmelite authors I could have tapped into, but I have given the final word to Pope John Paul II, perhaps also as a reminder that Carmel does not belong to itself: it belongs to the church and to the world. These are the words which perhaps might set the tone for us as we move through this liturgy back out into the world to which God

sends us; back out into the world we are sent to serve; back out into the world we are sent to love:

The world needs heralds of the gospel who are experts in humanity, who have a profound knowledge of the hearts of the men and women of today, sharing in their joys and hopes, anguish and sadness, and who are at the same time contemplatives in love with God.