

MATT TALBOT - A MAN FOR OUR TIMES

'We can hardly guess at what is on earth, and what is at hand we find with labour; but who has traced out what is in the heavens? Who has learned thy counsel, unless thou hast given wisdom and sent thy Holy Spirit from on high? And thus the paths of those on earth were set right, and men were taught what pleases thee, and were saved by wisdom.' Wisdom of Solomon 9.16-18.

(This quotation is from a passage marked by Matt Talbot in one of his bibles)

INTRODUCTION

Why should an inconspicuous Dublin timber-yard worker who died just over eighty years ago excite the interest of Catholics today? Could it be because that gaunt, slight little figure of a man was a supreme example of fortitude in the face of great personal difficulties? Or could it be that his is the simple story of a triumph of good over evil? Either way, we meet a man who overcame his difficulties and achieved his triumph through prayer, penance and worship of Our Lord in the Blessed Eucharist. The greater part of his life was sustained by the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and a deep devotion to Our Lady and the Saints. His trust in God was born of a deep need which, once recognised, proved to be his abiding strength. Not for him the drugs or rehabilitation therapy of today's society. Not for him the counselling or psychoanalysis demanded these days by the experts. This is a story of the healing power of the Sacraments, the virtue of hope, the grace of humility and the gift of perseverance. It was these marks which made Matt Talbot truly *a man for our times*. His life illustrates virtues and values of our faith which, sadly, today are so often pushed into the background.

HIS MOTHER'S PRAYERS

Matt Talbot was born on the 2nd May 1856, the second eldest of twelve children. He was born into a very poor family living in the slums of Dublin. The Modernist of today would describe him as a deprived child and, yes, Matt *was* deprived by the measure of material standards but his mother ensured that he was not deprived in spiritual matters. She never stopped praying for him. Compulsory school attendance was not in force in his young days so Matt had the run of the streets until he was eleven. Then came a general round-up of lads like him for an intensive course in religious knowledge and the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. But Matt had the reputation of being a 'mitcher' (a truant) in his school days. So, it was not surprising that he started working at the age of twelve - as a messenger boy for a firm of wine merchants.

At thirteen he came home drunk on wine so he was removed by his father from that job and went to work on the docks. He still came home drunk, but now on whiskey. At the age of seventeen Matt became a bricklayer and by the middle of the week his wages were gone - on drink. He would do anything for a drink even to the extent of pawning his shoes. This lifestyle continued until he was twenty-eight years of age - sixteen years during which the only thing he wanted was drink. 'His easy ride was on a sea of alcohol' to quote Father Paul Crane writing about Matt Talbot in the magazine *Christian Order*. But what turned the tide for this hopeless young man? What was it that carried him from a sea of alcohol to an ocean of grace? His broken-hearted mother never lost hope and she redoubled her prayers for her son. Perhaps it was as a result of his mother's prayers that Matt, despite his way of living, never stopped going to Mass on Sundays and Holydays although, of course, he had neither been to Confession nor received Holy Communion for many years.

THE TURNING POINT

It was on a memorable Saturday night that Matt went as usual to O'Meara's public house. He had no money so he had to hang about outside waiting for someone to buy him a drink. But his drinking pals ignored him and he was left, shivering and dejected, on the pavement. He was hurt and confused. Suddenly he walked away muttering under his breath 'I'm going home'. His mother expressed surprise at seeing him home early - and sober. She was still more surprised when Matt announced that he was going to the Holy Cross College to 'take the pledge'. Rather incredulous his mother told him not to take the pledge unless he intended to keep it and as he left the house she called after him: 'God give you the strength to keep the pledge!'. Matt walked to the Holy Cross College on the outskirts of Dublin. There he met a priest, went to Confession and took the pledge - for three months. (Later on he was to take it for a further three months then for one year and, finally, for life.)

On the Sunday morning he went to Holy Communion. The following morning his mother must have thought she was dreaming when Matt got up at 5 a.m. for Mass at the Jesuit Church in Gardiner Street before going to work. Matt prayed for the gift of prayer - and he received it in abundance. He developed a burning love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. On one occasion when a lady was telling him about her loneliness he told her that he could not understand how anyone could be lonely when they had Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to comfort them.

SETTING HIS PRIORITIES

Matt now had to adjust his whole routine to fit in with his new spiritual life. He changed his job and went to work in a timber yard because the starting time enabled him to hear Mass before going to work. When he finished work he went straight to the church for the Angelus and then remained, praying, in front of the Blessed Sacrament for a while. After this he would go home for his meal and then return to the church where he would stay until the public houses closed. Matt's faith now dominated his life. On Sundays and Holydays he would hear every Mass from the first to the last (which was at 12 noon in those days) and he always said that it was the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which gave him the strength to persist in a life of unceasing prayer and severe penance. He ate very little yet had great strength and out of his meagre wages as a labourer he gave very generously to charity - until the time when he himself had to accept charity. In the evenings Matt usually went to bed at 10.30.

He would get up at 2 a.m. to pray and, later, he would go to the church and kneel on the steps for half-an-hour until the sexton opened the doors. Then, after Mass at 6.15, home for breakfast and off to work at 7.45. As part of his new routine Matt joined the Men's Sodality and various Confraternities. He also joined the Third Order of the Franciscans at the church on Merchants Quay. It was in this commitment and the idea of penitential love that he found the training ground for holiness. Even though he had very little education he was a great example of how the Holy Spirit can work in our lives if we allow Him to do so. And Matt found that people would often come to him for advice and guidance - especially his workmates.

SPIRITUAL READING

His great love was spiritual books, often borrowed from friends and from the libraries attached to the Gardiner Street and Merchants Quay churches. He studied the writings of the early Fathers of the Church and it is a great testimony to his perseverance, and the working of the Holy Spirit, that he was able to do this bearing in mind that he had left school barely able to write his name. His personal collection of books ranged from simple religious pamphlets to spiritual classics like *The Confessions of St Augustine*. He had several copies of the complete Bible as well as copies of the New Testament and a separate copy of St John's Gospel. The Gospel of St Matthew was his favourite reading in the New Testament. Frequently he read the accounts of the Passion by the four Evangelists and in one of his bibles he marked, very heavily, the passage: '...unless you do penance you shall all perish.' Included among his many books were the lives of several saints notably St Catherine of Siena, St Rita of Cascia and St Teresa of Avila. Matt read and re-read St Teresa's instructions on how to pray. Thus it was that prayer and spiritual reading had taken the place of his former drinking companions. If he came across a passage of scripture that he did not understand he would write it out laboriously on a piece of paper and take it with him when he went to Confession where, after making his Confession he would pass the paper through the grill to the priest and ask for an explanation.

HIS PRAYER LIFE

One wonders what his mother thought on the occasions when she awoke at night and saw Matt kneeling motionless or reading by the candlelight in his shadowy room. She made no comment on his nightly vigils, nor did she mention it to the neighbours. Matt had a great devotion to Our Blessed Mother imploring her intercession by many decades of the Rosary each day. In fact, his mother was convinced that her son saw and spoke to Our Lady. He was always making novenas and was very strict about his penance and fasting. His fasts became more severe as time went on. His midday 'meal' taken at work consisted of a mixture of tea and cocoa with sometimes a little fish. He made a similar, week-long, fast before every major feast-day. His bed was a plank and his pillow a wooden block.

Yet all of this remained hidden until it became known after his death. Matt Talbot always kept his penance and sacrifices completely between himself and God. For example, if he was invited out to eat he would always accept whatever he was given so as to avoid drawing attention to himself. He dressed poorly but was scrupulously tidy and clean. Everything he did, he did for the glory of God. Despite his meagre diet he was amazingly hardy and he was able to cope with the heavy work at the timber-yard. He had a good relationship with his workmates. He was always cheerful and would laugh at a joke (provided it was not in bad taste). Whenever Matt had a spare moment at work he went to a little niche he had prepared between the stacks of timber and there he would enjoy a few minutes of quiet prayer.

REPARATION AND ALMSGIVING

Matt spent the last years of his life at number 18, Upper Rutland Street near Dublin city centre. His room was furnished only with the bare necessities of a monastic cell. When his Sodality meeting ended in the evenings he would return to his room to pray in front of a large crucifix and to read his spiritual books. He looked after his mother for twelve years before her death. This he was glad to do in reparation for all the pain and heartache he had caused her when he was drinking heavily. When he became too ill to work Matt continued to support many charities at home and abroad from his little savings until finally his money ran out. On Trinity Sunday, 7th June 1925, as he was hurrying to Mass in the Dominican church, Matt stumbled and fell. He was given the last rites and died. Taken to the nearby Jervis Street hospital his body was found to have a heavy chain around it and there were lighter chains around arm and leg. (*Note: Matt carried out his penances and mortifications under the guidance of a qualified spiritual director, Monsignor Michael Hickey, President of Clonliffe College. The chains, which he wore only on special occasions, were a symbolism of the slavery of Mary - a devotion propagated by St Louis Marie de Montfort.*)

It was reported that a man aged between 45 and 50 had been found dead. No-one knew who it was until the police traced his family. His body was removed to the Gardiner Street church where he had heard so many Masses. It was the eve of Corpus Christi - Wednesday 10th June. The funeral was a simple one costing less than ten pounds.

A MESSAGE FOR MANY

Writing a Foreword to Mary Purcell's book *Matt Talbot and His Times*, Archbishop Ryan of Dublin summarised the example left by Matt Talbot in these words: 'For the child, idling away precious time... Matt's message lies in the single comment in an old school roll-book: *a mitcher* (truant). Matt spent many painful hours trying to recover time lost in reading and writing classes. In the end he never really made it up. For the addict, smitten with remorse and self-loathing, Matt has a message. The first three months 'dry' were, he said, the hardest of his life. Prayer, especially prayer to Our Lady, gave him strength, determination and the will to persevere. The laity are encouraged today to read the Bible; for them Matt has a message. It was an astonishing achievement for an illiterate man to pore successfully and fruitfully over the Book of Deuteronomy, the Gospel of St John and the Epistles of St Paul. Matt Talbot's experience says that the Bible is truly a book for everyone once they have been touched by the grace of the Holy Spirit. At this time when we are trying to deepen our devotion to the Sacrament of Confession, Matt Talbot's own devotion to this Sacrament is striking.

The candid and beneficial discussions he had with his spiritual director were models of the priest/penitent relationship which the new rite is meant to establish. In our endeavours to increase devotion to the Blessed Eucharist Matt Talbot's daily fidelity to Mass and Holy Communion is an inspiration. His faith in the Real Presence was expressed in his kneeling, bowed figure; his slow genuflections; his recollection and devotion. Matt Talbot's life was truly that of a prophet.' The Cause for Matt Talbot's beatification was opened officially by Papal Decree in 1937. He is now called Venerable. His tomb is in the church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Sean McDermott Street, Dublin 1, which is also the address of the Vice-Postulator of the Cause to whom information about favours received through the intercession of Matt Talbot should be sent.