

‘SAINT’ OF THE WEEK - FR DOUG VENNE

St John’s parishioner Jeff Kemp wrote this piece in response to the first of a new series in last week’s newsletter - ‘Saint’ of the Week.

Sanctity? My only recently published work is poetry which hardly qualifies me to comment on a topic which has the awkward distinction of being both emotive and loosely defined, at least in popular usage. Yet I have known a saint. His memory was brought to mind by the mention of Bishop James Walsh (‘Saint Of the Week’) since Father Doug Venne was also a Maryknoll Missionary (the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America. *Doug-bhai* (*brother Doug*) as all in the village called him.

We heard about him when we lived in Tangail in Bangladesh as the ‘American priest who lives in a nearby village,’ and we made contact. At that time, we were virtually the only Westerners living in the town of 70,000 so it happened that Doug began to visit us with some regularity, following a request that he help us to pray in the situation we were living (totally immersed within Bangladeshi Islam). Arguably, he failed to do this since I don’t recall much discussion about ‘try this technique’ or ‘read that book’. Equally arguable, he knew that prayer isn’t learned vicariously.

We left Bangladesh in the mid 1990’s following an opportunity from the University of Edinburgh for me to do doctoral studies. The topic was a simple one – what were the structures that framed Islamic faith when the usually-mentioned ‘pillars’ (such as five-times-a-day prayer, pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting) weren’t possible due to poverty.

The initial problem was how an outsider could explore aspects of faith that people might be reluctant to discuss. I needed someone already part of the village to vouch for me.

I contacted Doug and he agreed for me to come and stay with him and so I spent three periods of around two months each in his hut. Sometimes he was there but not always.

An incident from the first day. The years we had lived in Bangladesh were spent in towns or cities, only ever visiting villages. I was aware the way to relate with people, particularly women, would be different. So I was startled when a woman standing to the side of the path suddenly called out to me, ‘*Doug-bhai* said you are here to talk to *pir-shabs* (*religious leaders*) (one aspect of my research) so you must meet my uncle.’ I soon realised the village was like an extended living area where human interactions were similar to an office in Scotland with everyone having freedom to speak and be heard. It was understood that, were I to pass this or any other woman from the village in the nearby town of Tangail, there would be no acknowledgement of each other.

From the first day, I was accepted into the village solely on *Doug-bhai*’s patronage: when I tried questioning those from nearby villages, there was no response. Within the village my research problem was the opposite. As soon as I talked to someone, others would soon join in to form a group of disagreeing views. My linguistic skills would falter.

Doug was trusted: I, therefore, could be trusted. Another day, talking to a day labourer when the *mullibi-sahib* (*leader of the mosque*) passed us and the labourer simply said, ‘what I don’t like about him is that he has no idea of our lives. He says I should pray but can’t say how I can go home, wash, put on clean clothing then go to the mosque and still make enough money to feed my family tonight.’ His words were said as one equal to another, knowing I wouldn’t use them to attack his faith.

Doug did know the realities of his neighbours’ lives since they were largely his as well. Not quite, since he deliberately lived slightly below their living standards. They hoped to eat three times a day: he limited himself to two chapattis with locally-made peanut butter at dawn and rice and vegetables at dusk. My first night in the village, before rolling out the mat to put on the dirt floor and unfurling the mosquito net, he said, ‘you will have to pay your way here.’ The sum was £13 a month which covered kerosene for cooking and light, plus food (no electricity, water for drinking and washing came from a well).

That was Doug's life – with one caveat. Once a month, he would go to the Catholic guest house in Dhaka for a couple of days and once a year the church would provide a retreat, usually in Thailand. For most of the year, Doug's life was spent within the life of the village.

He was an odd saint, insisting that three times a day he be left alone to pray. Because he ran an informal dispensary, people would come and ask for medication or advice but, if they arrived at midday, the hut-door would be closed and their calls for attention would be met with a shout of 'go away. I'm praying, come back later.'

'Doug loves us,' was the phrase I heard, time and again. And it was true, although expressed in completely unsentimental ways. Coming back from a morning's walk, I once saw him once berating a neighbour who had often 'borrowed' money and was now trying for another 'loan'. 'What about the hundred taka I gave you last time?' Doug was saying loudly and the man mumbling some explanation all while Doug was tenderly washing muck from the man's foot and then bandaging it: he was a day labourer and therefore unable to afford shoes even when the job was (as it had been that day) shovelling sand from the tray of a truck. The shovel had made a large gash in his foot.

'Doug loves us,' meant I could complete my studies. Perhaps he did teach me something about prayer since his first prayer session was pre-dawn when I would have to leave the hut and wander along the dark raised paths between the fields where snakes liked to rest. Sometimes prayer can be reduced to, 'please God, keep my thoughts away from what might be just in front of me.'

Doug's linguistic skills exceeded mine when it came to types of wounds or medication but (because it was my research area), my knowledge of religious terminology was better. So it was that people would ask me about what, exactly, he believed. Again, such questions came from a deep trust in someone who had lived alongside them for decades.

'Conversion?' he once said to me amidst a now forgotten conversation. 'It's not a matter of saying I was of that religion and now I belong to this,' before telling me how, a few years earlier, he was sure God told him to teach a particular boy to read. He already taught local women, the Bengali workbooks were kept in his hut and so he did as instructed although it made little apparent sense. The boy was a Hindu and therefore on the fringes of society, plus he had Muscular Dystrophy which meant he would die within a year or two. Which he did – but not before teaching his parents and siblings how to read. 'And' Doug added, 'he changed how those in the village view someone with a disability. He became respected, not mocked, and where else have you seen that? Conversion is a change of heart and only God can do that.'

Doug was kept busy with his informal clinics and teaching, but he was adamant that he was there solely to bring the sacrament every morning. This, he was certain, allowed Christ to be present in a way that otherwise was not possible. This might make him a mystic but not a saint, in the usual definition.

From living within the *Dar-al-Islam* [*a country ruled by Moslems*] I know how unprecedented trust of any Christian is and also how justified this mistrust of Christianity ('do not attempt to do us any more good, your good has done us too much harm already' is how Mohammed Abduh, a founder of the Islamic Brotherhood put it). There is always some suspicion that we Christians are hiding a secret agenda more for our benefit than theirs.

One of my last communications with Doug was to let him know that my wife and I were becoming Catholic. He replied, 'are you sure this is the right decision?' Which seems, on first glance, to be critical of Catholicism but it wasn't: his faith was always framed within the Catholic church. Instead, it showed a humility that never felt triumphant but always deferred to the other person's perspective. This humility, plus a faith lived over decades in a small part of Bangladesh, achieved a miracle: the slow transformation which allowed deep suspicion earned by Christians so often siding with the oppressor against the oppressed to be supplanted by trust.