

An insight into medieval piety: the Abergavenny Pax (newsletter 10, Spring 2003)

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The National Museum in Cathays Park, Cardiff, has some moving reminders of the depth of medieval piety and devotion. The display case which concentrates on the history of the medieval church in Wales is dominated by a wooden carving of Christ on the cross. This came from the rood screen of the little church at Kemeys Inferior in the Usk valley. It was preserved (miraculously, one might say) when virtually all these figures were destroyed, because some of the parishioners hid it in the stairs to the rood loft. Mark Redknap has recently published a detailed account of its history and restoration in the Monmouthshire Antiquary.

The display case contains a number of other treasures. One of the most unusual of these is the Abergavenny Pax. It is a bronze-gilt plaque depicting Christ on the cross, with John the Baptist on his left. (The figure of the Virgin Mary which could once be seen on the other side of the Crucifixion was lost before the plaque came to the Museum.) The plaque was found at St Michael's Church in Abergavenny in the nineteenth century. It probably came from the medieval church of St Mary. This was the church of the little Benedictine priory of Abergavenny, but it was also used as a parish church by the townspeople.

The pax would have been an important part of the celebration of Mass for the people of the medieval borough. They all believed that Christ was actually present in the consecrated bread and wine of the Mass, as a result of the prayer of consecration which the priest had said. This meant that, in order to receive Communion, they had to be in a state of absolute spiritual purity. Increasing emphasis was being placed on the appalling consequences of receiving the eucharist in a state of sin. As the medieval theologian James of Vitry explained, 'since sins have so multiplied in this land, it is permitted that communion be received by the laity only once a year, that is at Easter'. Preparation for the Easter communion involved making full confession of sins, receiving absolution and performing the appropriate penance (publicly if necessary). The communicant also had to be in good financial standing with the church and to be in charity with neighbours and fellow parishioners. This meant paying any outstanding dues and going round apologising to anyone you might have offended in the previous year.

Faced with this awesome series of demands, it is not perhaps surprising that ordinary lay people communicated so infrequently. Instead, the service of the Mass included substitutes for the Communion. Ordinary bread was blessed and distributed after the Mass. Before this, at the high point of the service, just before his own communion, the priest kissed the cloth on which the consecrated bread rested and the chalice which contained the consecrated wine. He then kissed the pax, which might be a carved or painted wooden panel or a metal plaque with a depiction of the crucifixion or of the Lamb of God. The pax was taken by the priest or the parish clerk to the congregation with the words 'Pax vobiscum' ('Peace be with you'). The parishioners all kissed the pax in turn. They were expected to observe strict seniority in doing this. In his book *The Stripping of the Altars*, Eamon Duffy has some amusing stories of parishioners who quarrelled over the right to kiss the pax first. On All Saints Day 1522 in the Essex parish of Theydon-Garnon, one John Browne smashed the pax over the head of the holy-water clerk, 'causing streams of blood to run to the ground', Browne was angry because another parishioner had been invited to kiss the pax before him. 'Pax vobiscum' indeed!

But for the more devout worshippers, the decoration of the pax reinforced the connection between Christ's crucifixion and the Eucharist. As well as the depiction of Christ on the cross, the Abergavenny pax has Latin verses, just legible in the battered inscription round the framework:

in crucis h[i/a]c specie ihc b[?e]n[?e] mo[n]st[ra]t
... alma beat tua mun[er]a [or possibly vulnera] laudat

It is difficult to supply a full reading or an exact translation, though the lines clearly glorify the Crucifixion and Christ's sacrifice and may refer to Mary's involvement. McNeil Rushforth suggested 'Here under the form of the Crucifix Jesus clearly shows the fashion of his death, which gracious Mary accounts blessed and glorifies thy sacrifice/wounds'. (This is from Sir Mortimer Wheeler's article 'A pax at Abergavenny' in the *Antiquaries Journal* vol 10, 1930.)

Obviously, few of the townspeople would have been able to read and understand the Latin. However, the fact that it was thought to be worth putting this inscription on a pax intended for ordinary parishioners suggests that the words must have had some significance for them. The people for whose use the Abergavenny pax was intended may have been illiterate but they were certainly not ignorant. They may have understood far more about the theology of the Crucifixion and the sacraments of the church than we give them credit for.

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