

24th April 2020

Failings

“Forsake me not when my strength faileth me.”

Psalm 71:8

Built into the altar in the Chapel of the Holy Cross at Buckfast Abbey in Devon is a Hair Shirt worn by Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England and respected counsellor to Henry VIII. Thomas More opposed the king's separation from the Catholic Church, refusing to acknowledge Henry as Supreme Head of the Church of England and the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. After declining to take the Oath of Supremacy, he was convicted of treason and executed in 1535. Pope Pius XI canonised him as a martyr. And Thomas More wore a Hair Shirt ...

A Hair Shirt is a garment of rough cloth made from goats' hair and worn next to the skin as a penance for past sins, to encourage self-control, and as an act of devotion to Christ. How Thomas More's Hair Shirt found its way to Buckfast Abbey is too long a tale to tell here. But I'm more intrigued as to why such a good man – and now a Saint – should have felt the need to wear a Hair Shirt in the first place.

At his execution, Thomas More famously said: “I die the king's good servant, but God's first.” It was his faith in his God which made him acutely aware of his own failings. No matter how good he was or how righteous his cause, he knew, in the face of God, he wasn't perfect.

Do we need to wear a Hair Shirt to remind us of our failings? I hope not. You can wear one if you like, but I'm certainly not going to try. But I *am* going to take an example from St Thomas More and know that the more faith I have, the more I have to acknowledge my failings, and the more I do that, the more of the Grace of God I can know.

A prayer for today

*Gracious God, as I acknowledge my faith, make me aware of my failings;
as I acknowledge my failings, further strengthen my faith. Amen*

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