

15th April 2024

Principles

"Principle is ever my motto."

Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil* (1845)

My recent visit to Abbotsford House, the home of Sir Walter Scott, threw up some surprising finds. Visiting Abbotsford's chapel – built by Scott's family as part of an extension to the building added some years after his death – I discovered some artefacts in the foyer that were unexpected.

The Anglican priest, John Henry Newman, was a leading figure in "The Oxford Movement". As an influential faction in the Church of England in the first half of the 19th century, the group advocated a return to the medieval Catholic Church. With the passing of the Roman Catholic Relief Act in 1829, the "Newmanites", as they were called, argued that the Anglican Church should return to the beliefs and liturgical rituals of the Roman Catholic Church from before the Reformation.

The Oxford Movement lost impetus in the 1840s and Newman converted to Catholicism in 1845. He was, I discovered, a devoted reader of Sir Walter Scott, and his interest increased in 1847 when James Hope – a close friend from Oxford – married Scott's granddaughter, Charlotte Lockhart. Newman first visited Abbotsford in 1852, celebrating Mass in a temporary chapel in the original house. In 1879, John Henry Newman was elevated to Cardinal. By the end of the 19th century, he was acknowledged as one of the greatest churchmen and theological thinkers of the age. His vestments, missal and biretta are proudly on display in Abbotsford.

Whatever I expected in my visit to the home of Sir Walter Scott, it wasn't in the realms of theology, churchmanship and ecclesiology. But John Henry Newman took me there. And in so doing he got me thinking about labels, and prophets, and people who challenge the "norms" of thought, and rebels who don't "fit", and folk whose insights make them rise above the ordinary, and people who stick to their principles.

Whatever we think of John Henry Newman – or Sir Walter Scott, for that matter – we cannot remain unmoved by dedication and commitment, or unimpressed by intellect and principled thinking. Principles matter, and always will. John Henry Newman reminded me of that.

A prayer for today

*Lord, help me to stick to my principles of love and compassion –
and to show that they will always matter. Amen*