

Some saints live at the centre of the world – St Ambrose, for example. He the Roman Governor of a large province before being made Bishop by popular acclaim. Others, like St Francis of Assisi, lived at its edge, fascinating and appalling for the freedom they found in following Jesus who had no roof over his head.

John Bradburne, whose cause for sainthood has been introduced in Zimbabwe, was one of those wild, holy people. His life began conventionally – the son of an English Anglican minister, educated at a Public School. When the Second World War broke out, however, he left the standard path. He joined the Indian army and was sent to Malaysia shortly before the Japanese invasion. He escaped by walking for a month through the jungle to the coast, capturing a sampan that sank, capturing another, catching the last British frigate out of Sumatra to India, and fighting in Burma with the guerrillas of the legendary Orde Wingate.

In Malaysia he had experienced a powerful religious awakening that shaped his post-war life. He, stayed with the Benedictines at Buckfast Abbey where he became a Catholic. For twenty years then he travelled the world with all his belongings in a small bag, briefly joining the Carthusians, the Benedictines and a small congregation in Jerusalem, living as a hermit near Dartmoor, and staying in monasteries and churches, as he camped out in his wandering around Europe and England. During these twenty years he continued to write poems, some explicitly religious and all expressing simply his wonder at the beauty of the natural world. He became a member of the Secular Franciscans, following the way of life of Francis of Assisi. His life and poetry revolved around the hours of the Franciscan Office of Our Lady which he sang each day.

He found the work that has defined his life after he made contact with a similarly wild priest with whom he had served in the army. He asked the priest to find him a place in Zimbabwe where he might pray. In 1969 he came to a leper colony at Mutemwe, some distance from Harare, and was appointed Warden. The lepers there were isolated and neglected. He cared for them, washed and dressed their wounds, and above all showed them respect and love. This angered the Committee that controlled the colony and also the local villagers who wanted to be rid of the lepers. It led to his dismissal for refusing to cut their rations and make them wear name tags. He subsequently lived in a tin shed near the lepers, where he continued to support them and to write poetry. Local hostility to him led eventually to his murder in 1979 in midst of the civil war against colonial rule in Zimbabwe.

John's life could be described in many ways. Many people would have seen him as a misfit and a tramp, who could form no firm commitments, make no home, and hold down no job. Others may have seen him as both hero and victim of a war that left him traumatised; others as a man who gave himself to the rejected of a far country and died rejected by it.

To the lepers and those who came close to him, however, he was a man of God who saw in them a dignity that others denied. His poems, written on scraps of paper during his life, reveal a man whose life was focused on God, fascinated like St Francis of Assisi by the beauty of nature and the lure of poverty. This spirit is caught in the verse of a poem that he later wrote about his first visit to Assisi.

Up, up, my soul,
With gladness now
Resume by grace of God
To tell the glory of the Plough
Seen from the stubbled clod
Whereon I slept if slept I not
In the roadside ditch;
O the nights were hot
And bright they were
And the Plough stood fair
With its jewelled points
Above in the lovely air.