



*A voice for our village*

## Video Interview with Rev. Nick Devenish

Rev. Nick Devenish, ('ND'), Vicar of Cartmel

Interviewer : Anna Maria Ashe ('AA')

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Recording duration : 35 mins 10 secs

- AA Nick, we're in the grounds of the Rectory, [should be Vicarage] your garden, rather splendid, and it sits in a place of pilgrimage. Give us a little bit of that history if you could.
- ND Where we're sat now is in the grounds of what was the monastery of Cartmel Priory, which has been in formation for over 800 years. Where we're sat there would have been a big wall around us enclosing the monastery, to give a sense of privacy and security. Just over your shoulder would have been where the fish pools were. So there's fresh water here, and the monks would keep their fish stocks, ready for their staple diet of fish and bread. And then here would have acted as a major [1 min] centre, a centre for pilgrimage.
- AA So this was under the auspices of the Prior. Can you explain a little of the role of the Prior ?
- ND Well, the Prior was in charge. For me, I would like to think of it as a sort of father figure. There would have been young novice monks here, which would have been under his care. He would also have had the support of more mature monks, and they would have had a very strict rule of living for the way that they worshipped and worked. But he would have had a greater responsibility. Our formation of William the Marshall, who founded the Priory, who without him we probably wouldn't have had Magna Carta, was given the lands of Cartmel, we're talking about 15 ... 17,000 acres, and the Prior looked after those lands. We were a Priory which would stand alone. We didn't report to an Abbey, [2 mins] we were a stand alone institution, and so the Prior had responsibility for those tenant farmers, for the sort of arable nature and the farming that went on here, we know ...
- AA So it was the greater community then, [ND : It was] that he was responsible for ?
- ND Yes. He was responsible for a greater community. If you want to access any sort of what we might call public services, well you came to the monastery. So there was a form of Infirmary here, and the monks were educated, so there'd be learning and education. Obviously Latin and scriptures, but the Priory Church, which is left after the Reformation, was the heart and soul of this place. It was a place that they would be in and out of day and night, waking at 3 in the morning to observe the saying of psalms and praising God, and then going [3 mins] back to bed, and then being back in again at 6 in the morning. And the Prior had a duty of care, but also to instruct and to lead the monastery with this incredibly varied and wide outreach to the community.

AA And how does the story of William affect you personally ?

ND Well, we're 2016. Last year, 2015, as a country we celebrated the anniversary of 800 years of the formation of Magna Carta. It is believed, many historians believe, that without William Marshall, Magna Carta wouldn't have happened. Magna Carta gave us the basis of the Western democracy, so we're immensely proud of our founder, and what he achieved, and what he won for us as a nation, [3 mins] but also to have that formation of this as a monastery. There was a reason for it. It was a way of showing your wealth. But actually more importantly for him, you know, he is referred to and revered as the greatest knight. We know he went out with the crusades, he's a Knight Templar. So part of the Priors' role was to pray for their founder. And it obviously had some bearing because he lived to a ripe old age, and managed to see out a number of Kings, which was, you know, he'd got everything. He could fight, he knew diplomacy, but he was also intelligent enough at how to bring two warring factions, the King and the barons, together, and to create what we now have, the basis of democracy, with Magna Carta.

AA So you're living with history every day.

ND And that history is continued, when you think of this building being here for over 800 years. We've seen ... this ... the Priory [5 mins] has experienced some of the darkest times in our history. The Reformation is not a good time for the church, and I feel incredibly emotional if I start to think about my predecessor, the Prior in 1537, who realises that Henry's army is coming, the Catholic Church, the Catholics, the monks are to be thrown out. And I can, you know, I can only imagine, for him, you know, saying to the novices, saying to some of the older monks, get out, just get out, get them to France and keep them safe. And they're saying, well, what are you going to do ? And he says, I'm going to stay. And so it makes me quite emotional to think of it, that three other monks stay with him. Well you then have a number of the village also stand firm. And they opposed the fact that the Catholics are to be thrown out. So what happens ? They're arrested, they're taken back across the sands to [6 mins] Lancaster, they are tried and executed for treason. And it doesn't stop there, because the village still fight for Cartmel Priory, even though they know that the Prior has gone, people have been killed for standing up, and they fight for the Priory Church. And they plead with Henry's army, and said that if you destroy this building, we have nowhere to worship. And because of that, the Priory is still here today. So we very much live that sense of 1537. For our Magna Carta celebrations last year, we were so fortunate that David Starkey came to speak to us, and I had some time with him on my own, and he started questioning me about our screen that surrounds the area where the monks used to worship. And I thought, oh my goodness, I'm really not [7 mins] fully up to date on the history of this screen, as to who built ... you know, made it, and so on and so forth. He looked at me and said, Nick, he said, I'm not interested in that. He said : do you know what you've got here ? He said, this screen was destroyed as part of the Reformation, and then in 1600, it gets replaced. This is Catholicism being reinstated in a Protestant nation. He said I cannot believe that it was put back, and he said I cannot believe that it wasn't destroyed in the years leading up to, as it was then, 2015 now, 2016. He said yours is a church that knows its own mind, and is prepared to stand up for it. And in a sense, we feel that really powerfully here. And the Church of England, the church in this nation, the church in Western Europe is in a tough time, and we feel it's time

for the [8 mins] Priory again to stand, and to put forward a vision that we pray under God will safeguard its existence for not just 100 years, but another 800 years.

AA And how do you actually live that story yourself as a vicar here ?

ND I live that story with the sort of responsibility that comes with it. But also, it gives me in some respects, a mandate for the vision that we have for here, that this place has known God's blessing for over 800 years, that tens of thousands of pilgrims that still visit us, I believe get a sense of that blessing, and I just want to work with God, and his mission for this place, that there will [9 mins] continue to be a strong Christian presence, for those who might be with us week by week, but also those who visit, and those who will attend services as part of their holiday, as part of visiting our restaurants, our racecourse, and maybe experience something they had not expected when they made a pilgrimage to Cartmel.

AA And within the story of your life, what is the particular pilgrimage that you've taken in your religious life, to reach this point, if you like. Does it feel as if, yes, there was a path that you were walking, and learning so much about, but, that you're here for a reason, you in particular ?

ND I feel a sense of calling to be here, to be the vicar for the Priory at this time. And [10 mins] when you look at my life really, you might not seem a ... that that's a natural route to take. In fact, if my wife was here, she never expected to be married to a vicar, let alone be a vicar's wife, because when we married, I didn't even go to church. And so over sort of 25, 26 years, a lot has changed for us. I worked in industry, and come from a commercial background, and was a commercial manager for another icon in our nation, for Marks and Spencers. And I've seen similarities between what that organisation has been through, and I can see similarities with what the Church of England is going through. You know, the Church of England in 2016 is really up against it.

AA And by that you mean the drop in numbers coming to church, or are we [11 mins] talking about the ...

ND No. I mean for the Church of England, even over the last 30 or 40 years, we've seen a rapid decline in Sunday congregations, but also, the congregations that we have generally, there are obviously exceptions to this, are aging. And our society has changed enormously. The Church of England has benefited enormously from those who came through the war years, because they know what it's like, they know hardship, and they're real doers, and they've kept our church afloat. But they're either not with us, or are now too old. And even when we are able to attract people to consider belonging to a church community, to consider spirituality as part of their life, they're not necessarily actually want to be on the flower rota, the Sunday school rota, so we're in a very different time.

AA [12 mins] So what do you think you have to bring to this evolving story ?

ND I think I bring someone who is ever optimistic about God's passion to be in relation with all of his creation. And I think that we need to be open, to be looking at what is he doing. Cartmel Priory, 60 ... 80,000 at least visitors coming into that building. God is ... I would say God is doing something. We're fortunate that we are not a church that is in decline. We are

very traditional, we're a choral church, our music is very important to us, and we're fortunate that that's another means of attracting people to be part of Cartmel Priory. Our visitors are very important to us. That sense of pilgrimage has not gone away.

AA So would you actually [13 mins] look at the tourists who come to visit the Priory as pilgrimages in a certain way, or ...

ND I do. My own personal view is that I see the popularity of Cartmel is to do with what is engrained in this place, that the monks have given us this sort of sacred space, that when people come here, they might not be able to articulate, they might not have the vocabulary for it, but something or other touches them, and they go and share that. And they go to their friends and their family and say you must go and visit Cartmel.

AA You actually quoted a Sunday newspaper to me. What was that ?

ND Yes. Only last weekend, a member of my congregation presented to me an article in one of the leading Sunday papers, and it was amazing in that a cycling group had come on holiday to the South Lakes, [14 mins] never heard of Cartmel Priory, and actually we got a write up in the Telegraph because they were so amazed that they had stumbled across the Priory, and the final footnote was that it was the highlight of their cycling tours, and it was something on the joys of cycling because you never know what you might come into. So they organised this tour, didn't realise we were here, came into the Priory, and the Priory was the highlight of their tour, and they are not alone in that. You've only got to read TripAdvisor to see what that building ... what it does, when you come in to it.

AA And of course it's a huge edifice in a very small village, and it does have a great impact, and you would see that impact as what exactly ? We can't be ignored ?

ND Well the impact is huge, but it's interesting in that many visitors, they ... I've [15 mins] been asked, stood outside the Priory : vicar, where's the Priory ? To which, I look around, trying not to look as if they're stupid, but say, it's that massive thing behind me. And of course they're looking for a ruin, so they come with a mindset that actually this is a historic visit. And of course it is, because the vaulted arches and the architecture that's here. But then they can go and experience the place, that's been a place of worship, contemplation, silence, prayer, for over 800 years. And for me, it sort of brings heaven and earth ... the boundaries are very loose and flexible and, almost put your hand through, either way.

AA They talk about thin places, [ND : That's it, that's the word I was looking for] the thin places, just betwixt both. [ND : Yes] And I suppose it's a spirituality in a way [16 mins] that you sense something other than [ND : Yes] what is obvious.

ND And something that attracted me to come here, to Cartmel, was ... I think for many of our visitors, as I was when I holidayed here, we come here for the fells, and you most definitely can have a spiritual experience whilst you're try to get up the Old Man of Coniston, and I think that when you are on holiday, normal life is put on hold for a few weeks if you're here for that time, and I think there is more of an openness to actually walk into a church, which I think is harder when you are back in your own parish, with everything else that's going on. And also I think some of the feelings now that people have about church, for many in our

society, it's only a place they go for christenings weddings and funerals, so they actually don't know how to behave, they're not sure what reception they're going to have. So actually if you walk in as a holiday [17 mins] maker, you're not so bothered if you stand up at the wrong time because you're less likely to bump into someone. And I think that that sort of ... almost a sense of hypocrisy of coming, is taken away when you're on holiday. And there is that, more of maybe a spiritual openness, because you're out walking, or you're out in creation. And we have holiday makers who holiday the same time every year. They come back to Cartmel, and the Priory is their church. So they may only go to church two or three times a year, but the Priory is their church.

AA Which must make you feel very warm inside, to think that's how they regard the church.

ND It does, and ... But what comes with that is not only a huge sense of privilege, but actually a sense of responsibility. And as a church, as the Priory church, we, as part of our vision, we need to be thinking more about how we engage more with modern [18 mins] technology, how we catch up with social media, how can, you know, Facebook, things that people are using now, how can we work with those ...

AA You strike me as a very modern man though. You do tweet. [ND : Yes] You have a television presence behind you, I'm sure there might be more. How important do you think that is for your congregation, to see you as somebody very present in the world today, in this medieval setting ?

ND Yea. You're referring to ... that I've been part of a Channel 4 TV programme. I think for some of my congregation, they find ... [AA : Also you're a tweeter] and a tweeter, they might find that difficult, because it sort of breaks the sort of norms they've been used to with vicars over many decades. But I think that also [19 mins] relates to the fact that they're finding technology hard, not understanding that, whereas we might pick up a telephone to say, would you like to come round for a cup of tea, actually, people use Facebook, and we don't quite understand how that's happened, and why that's going on. For me, that sort of coverage within the national TV has actually enabled people in our culture, that maybe don't have a connection with the church, to actually see a vicar, and maybe I hope think, well, he's OK, and I'm making contact. It's September. January and February of this year, we were absolutely inundated by young people wanting to talk to me about marrying them. [AA : As a consequence of your TV appearance] absolute consequence. It falls into this area I believe [20 mins] of hypocrisy. You know, they'll say to their friends, we've got engaged, we want to be married, and they'll say, where are you getting married, I fancy a church. And their friends'll say : why are you doing that, you don't go to church ? And therefore, the actual sort of picking up a phone, to actually ring a vicar that they don't know, is so hard. So don't tell me that when people have been married in church, they just want it for the building, it's such a major thing for them to do to actually call a vicar and to say, can we talk to you about a wedding. You know, they've got over so many barriers to do that. My own feeling is that because of some exposure on national television ... [AA : They feel you're approachable] they thought me approachable, and we were inundated with requests.

AA And would they make reference to it, or was it something that you just understood because they might have made indirect reference to things that were said in the programme ?

- ND I'd be interested from your experience. [21 mins] I mean, it was only a very limited exposure, but I've learnt that the British public actually don't say anything. You just might get a look. Someone did ask me for a selfie, I think one selfie. [laughs] So ... my own personal feeling is that we tend to run at ... you sort of get the same number of weddings, I've noticed in my time as a vicar. There was such a huge spike, I can only put it down to being part of Married at First Sight.
- AA This was a very controversial time for you, well, for the country, it created a lot of controversy. But it brought benefits, I'm sure, because it opened discussion. And I think through your presence on the programme, it must have had a benefit. As you said, there was a spike in [22 mins] marriage. Would you care to say any more on that ?
- ND I would. We're sat in the garden, and when I was first contacted about appearing on Married at First Sight, for many a night spent walking round here, just weighing up whether this was a good thing to do. The remit of the programme is controversial, that people marry, at first sight. And when you just hear that, you think, well, this is completely bonkers, which was my first thought. Why would I want to be a part of this ? But it wasn't until I then actually started to hear the story, and it was the stories of those young people who came forward, who were professionals in their early thirties, that I felt this was something that I wanted to support, and to be a part of. [23 mins] And still feel today that society needs to address the question that they are raising, which is, that there are many in our nation who want to be married, and to settle down, but because of so many varying reasons, they're not able to find that person who wants the same things as they do. So why not try a different approach ? Why not try a scientific approach, which has a member of the church involved, who can be there on hand to support them, to partially support them, but also to be there to discuss their view of marriage, and are they serious about this. What have they thought about commitment ? And what sort of happened in the firestorm after it was aired ... there was a lot of controversy, but what it did was it actually got [24 mins] people talking. And for me, it was worth taking that risk, I don't regret it, I will do it again, because people started to talk about the church as being part, and having something to say with regard to this issue. I think it's so much better to be in the situation, than to be like so many, I am so sorry to say this, that so many within the church were just judging. And some were judging without even watching and understanding.
- AA So are you talking about they were judging you, rather than the programme ?
- ND They were. [AA : Yes] And I think the media got caught on the hop, because I think the media expected sixteen year olds, that had been sort of coerced, and were suddenly faced with company directors, and people with long qualifications, who were prepared to be married at first sight. And so they couldn't really [25 mins] rubbish them, so they went after me.
- AA OK. And particularly you, because this is something the church should not have been involved in ? Something that seemed almost trivial, in approach to marriage ?
- ND The ... yes ... it was seen as though I was giving credibility [AA : OK] to something that was trivial. [AA : But that's not what you were doing] As far as I'm concerned, it's the complete opposite. [AA : Yes] And at the very beginning, we were asked, in Series 1, we were asked if

we would meet with individuals, as experts, and we had a whole group of men, because men and women couldn't be together, in case there might have been a match later down the line, and the idea was pitched. And so everyone, from the beginning, knew exactly what they were getting themselves into. And when it was said, "and you will get married", [26 mins] there was this massive intake of breath. And most people just ran a mile, which is absolutely understandable. I spoke to a woman afterwards, and I will never forget her. In her thirties, she's gorgeous, intelligent, got a fantastic job, and when she started to tell me that she had been through everything, parents linking her up, friends linking her up, hadn't worked at university, there was no one at work, no one in the gym, which was basically their lives, work and gym, and she'd been through internet. She said it was absolutely horrendous. And she said in London now, you could be on a date, and because of social media, you could be with someone an hour later. And then someone else an hour later than that. And she said, I don't want that. So she'd kind of stopped. And her parents had fled Uganda, through Amin, [27 mins] and they'd come from where arranged marriages is part of their culture, and she said it worked for mum and dad, why wouldn't I try this. And I just felt with, you know, a dad myself, with a young, you know, daughter in her twenties, if she wanted to do this, I'd want someone there to support her. So from that night, I said, I'll do this.

AA And what's interesting is you say you'll do it again, that you're not put off by the experience, so for you it was a positive experience.

ND For me it was a positive experience. It taught me a great deal about myself. It taught me a great deal about the Church of England, and the way I was treated, so I've no illusions really about the organisation I work for. And that has helped me in my stand to support Cartmel Priory. Not only will I do it [28 mins] again, Series 2 will be coming out very shortly. [AA : It's done then] It's done.

AA We know there's a lot of churn in the church at the moment, but how is it impacting here ?

ND The church has got lots that it's grappling with, and I think for me, the over arching problem is the declining congregations, the decline in it's financial resources, and also the decline in priests that will be available to run parishes. And that's really beginning to hit us here, and hit Cartmel Priory. We've been working as part of a grouping of eleven parishes, and in some respects, it's been a bit like the Brexit debates where 20 odd years ago, we gave away some of our powers, and over time, that's beginning to work [29 mins] against us. It's working against us in the decisions we wish to make for Cartmel Priory, but also it's hindering how we relate to the diocese. And I fully appreciate, you know, the senior team have got a problem, because they are trying to manage the hundreds of parishes that there are here in the diocese ...

AA And when you say manage them, you're talking about keeping them open, keeping the doors open, and that's not viable.

ND Members of congregations may have been there all their lives, have real real emotional attachments to a parish church. And we remember times when there was just one vicar, one parish. Well, that's not been a reality for decades. And we've been on this slow decline, and we are on this slow decline, and my own personal concerns are, coming from a



commercial background, is that if we seek to spread [30 mins] the resources ever thinner, by trying to keep everything running, we could end up losing the lot. And we're not looking at what's working. And I think we need to re-centre our focus, and look on those places that are not in decline, and actually be doing the opposite. Rather than spreading the resources, I think we should be bringing them in, to support those centres that actually have an opportunity of surviving. And I would use that word, I use it markedly, that we are looking for survival.

AA Do you feel that the Priory could be under threat then ?

ND Absolutely. I think the Priory is under threat now.

AA And because of numbers, dwindling numbers, or ...

ND Fortunately, the Priory is not in decline, but it's also not in rapid growth either. But we ... as I say, we're not losing numbers, we're consistent, but [30 mins] it's not where I would like to see it. We've got slight growth, but it needs to be much more. And so we need a concerted effort, and focus, to carry through the vision, to enable the Priory to flourish and grow, to be what it is, and then maybe in the future it can have the potential then to support other parishes. So how I see the future, as I look at what's happened over the last 30 or 40 years, it could be that there will really only be major centres, centres of excellence, centres that have resources, centres that have a clear vision for growth, and then from that, possibly, there could be a way of supporting other parishes. But that's not good news, if you're a small parish, a few miles away from Cartmel Priory, and I do accept that, and I know that's a very [32 mins] difficult message to convey. But I think that's the reality of where we are. And so for Cartmel Priory, we're seeking to take it in a different direction, to safeguard this ministry, to prioritise Cartmel Priory, for it then to be a place that could help to support others in the future, if that's what's going.

AA I'm keen to know what this direction is, your vision for the Priory at this time now.

ND Our vision for the Priory is really a very traditional model, that collaborately, working with lay folk in the community, that the priest helps to lead the church, so that we do have a priestly presence on a Sunday for our acts of worship. In a place like Cartmel [33 mins] Priory, that isn't just Sundays. We've got events and services happening throughout the week, visiting choirs, concerts, schools, just to name but a few. But I think at the heart of what it is, we have a clear vision and strategy for growth. And I think that's the important thing. You see, we're not here just to sort of safeguard the Priory for its own sake. It is a religious centre, it's a place of Christian heritage, and everything that we're about is maintaining that Christian presence here in this place. Not maintaining it, seeking it to grow and to flourish. So we're going to safeguard and cherish our traditions, but actually we're going to make some changes to bring in the newness. So we want to free up our nave, so we want a greater flexibility of space. I'd love to see a skate [34 mins] park in the Priory, and invite our young people to come in.

AA Say that again, vicar !



ND I would like to see a skate park at the back of the Priory, for a limited period, to invite all our youngsters to come and enjoy that building. We're in the throws of setting up a film club, so we want to show the new releases in the back of the Priory. We started a brand new family service, which looks completely different to everything else we do, and we're already beginning to attract young families. So it's about being true to what we are, but it's actually also having an eye to what's going on in culture, and just saying, we're here for you, this is a place for you. The more community use we can have for the Priory, the greater the chances of it's survival, because there'll be a greater sense of belonging. This place has been here for 800 years. It is why Cartmel is here. And under our watch, we're going to make sure that it's going to survive well into the future.

Break in recording at 35 mins 00 secs, then silence to end of file at 35 mins 10 secs.