



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### RENEWAL OF VOWS

"Cast away the alien gods among you and give your hearts to the Lord the God of Israel." Such are the words of Joshua to the people who wish to be bound by covenant to the Lord. Surely we each need to ask ourselves, during this our retreat and as we approach the renewal of our vows, "Are there alien gods in my life? If so, what are they? How may I, by the Lord's grace, cast them out? Are there alien gods in our life as a community? If so, what are they? How may we, by the Lord's grace, cast them out?" And, most importantly, and indeed it is this question we should ask first, "What is it, to give my heart to the Lord? What is it for us to give our heart to the Lord? How, by the Lord's grace, may I, may we, do that?"

In Joshua, the atmosphere of the scene of approach to the Lord is one, it must be said, of fear. The disastrous consequences that will follow any betrayal of the Lord are underlined. "What is the difference between the Old and the New Testament?" asks Saint Augustine. "Only this," he says, "the difference between fear and love." In the gospel we see little children approaching the Lord for him to lay his hands on them and say a prayer. The disciples try to stop them, but the Lord insists that they be allowed to come. His words are among those most deeply inscribed in my memory. I remember them in the form I first heard and learned them, as a little boy in the Presbyterian Church, in the form of the Authorized Version of the Scriptures. The Lord says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of heaven." If I am like you, then there is a little child in each of us, or rather, each of us, in his deepest being, is a little child. Not the inner child of the psychologists, although I believe that exists, too. But the little child which is who we are in our deepest being before God and our fellow human beings, the little child who is so lowly, so lacking in power, in understanding, who so needs guidance, direction, the little child who is so humble, so pure, yes, so innocent, the little child into whom our deepest being was transformed at baptism, and to become one with whom, before we die, is our lifelong struggle. As we come before the Lord in a few minutes to renew our vows, we are, it seems to me, these little children. And what do we have to bring him? Nothing, but ourselves, and our vows -- as baptized Christians, as monks -- for these vows say who we are, who we are called more and more perfectly to be. We come as gifted with the sublime gift of our call, our call as Christians, as monks. We come for him to lay his hands on us, to say a prayer, to bless us. "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of heaven."

At this moment, there cannot but be in our minds and hearts the prayer for the gift of final perseverance, of perseverance until the very end, until the very moment of death. It is the terrible glory of the creature endowed with free will that he is capable of, that he cannot avoid, making a free choice that determines his



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everlasting destiny. The angels made it in one choice, at the first moment of their creation, which expressed in a blaze of actuality all the reality of their being, holy or wicked. We creatures of souls informing bodies live a so much less clear-cut life, but a life of spirit caught up in matter which is potentially so glorious that it was one of us the Lord united to himself. We prepare for the choice through many previous choices, we never know quite when or whether we have made it, and through many subsequent choices we confirm or weaken it. As we become older, as each day brings us closer to the supreme moment of death, we must pray more and more earnestly for the gift of final perseverance. Pray, brothers, pray that you will be faithful to your vows.

But let not this be our last thought. Here is our last thought: the Lord Jesus welcomes you, he welcomes you this morning, at this moment. He opens his arms to you, little child that you are with nothing but yourself, your vows to give him -- and who but he gave you that self, those vows? -- he welcomes you and embraces you and lays his hands on you and blesses you. He says, "Suffer . . ." He will not allow you to fall away; every hair of your head is numbered, he will never allow you to fall away from him, closer to him than the crowds, closer to him than the disciples, closer to him than the twelve, until they too become little children. "O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."