

AN ADDRESS GIVEN BY THE DEAN AT EVENSONG ON ALL SAINTS DAY
SUNDAY 1 NOVEMBER 2009, WITH THE INSTALLATION OF THE REVEREND IAN GIBSON
AS CANON TREASURER

To listen to the catalogue of people who exhibited such forms of courage and eccentricity in our second Lesson, from the letter to the Hebrews, and were then – for their pains – sawn in two when they were not keeping lonely vigil in holes in the ground, might be thought to give sanctity a bad name! Or was the reading chosen to give Canon Ian Gibson a foretaste of life as a member of the Chapter of this Cathedral?

The New Testament lesson for the Evensong of All Saints is, of course, a reminder that Christian history has been seeded with examples of extraordinary heroism, and the martyrs are of a source of very particular inspiration. The Feast of All Saints is, above all, a call to *persistence in faith*. All, so St Paul tells us, are ‘called to be saints’, so rather than dwell on the extremes of devotion or the out-of-the-ordinary activities of certain of God’s saints, we would do better to heed the teaching of Jesus in the seemingly more mundane circumstances of our own lives.

In St Mark’s Gospel, Chapter 10, a rich young man comes to Jesus and asks ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus reminds him of the Commandments, and the imperative of generosity. As the young man walks away disconsolately, Jesus turns to the disciples and says, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.’ ‘Then who *can* be saved?’ they exclaim... and Jesus – thanks be to God – gives the reply, ‘For God, all things are possible.’

The first demand, underpinning all other, is love of God and love of neighbour. It is not enough, says Jesus, to *respect* goodness or just dealing in others. The rich young man went away because he preferred a faith that did not impinge on his life-style, a faith that did not make a difference, and so was an obstacle to the Kingdom.

This demand seems pretty well impossible to the disciples, but Jesus is quite clear: Trust in God is the key to the Kingdom - the key to the seemingly impossible task of passing through the eye of a needle. Who but a saint could live up to that?

Well, exactly! Two of them – two saints – come to mind, for different reasons, but I hope equally appropriately.

The first is the late 19th century Carmelite Nun Thérèse of Lisieux, whose relics have been touring this country and evoking extraordinary scenes of prayer and devotion, in York Minister no less than in Roman Catholic churches.

Thérèse suffered much in her short life. She contracted TB in the days before appropriate medication, and died at the age of 24. But she had an extraordinary focus on Jesus, and a faith that was both simple and very profound. Listen to these words from her posthumous autobiography:

‘The point which came home to me most of all was that it was no good leaving charity locked up in the depths of your heart. ‘A lamp,’ says Jesus, ‘is not lighted to be put away under a bushel measure; it is to be put on the lampstand, to give light to all the people in the house’. The lamp, I suppose, stands for charity, and the cheerful light it gives isn’t meant simply for the people we are fond of; it is meant for *everybody* in the house, without exception.’

Words to encourage personal devotion and loving actions. Words, too – it seems to me – to inspire those of us who minister, worship or offer our time and our gifts within this Cathedral, whose light – or the light it contains – is meant for everybody, without exception: free at the point of entry, welcoming and inclusive in the hospitality it offers, both personal and Eucharistic. We must find new ways of shining that lamp more brightly, and offering the invitation more effectively, for that is the tradition of our Church and of this place.

And then, our own Richard – St Richard of Chichester, whose remains were buried here, and of whom a relic now rests in his Shrine behind the High Altar. I choose him as my second saint because his short ministry was strikingly similar, in more practical ways, to that of Thérèse.

He gave himself to the people of Sussex with such generosity, diligence and good humour, that they came quickly to know him and to claim him as their own, in spite of the lack of motor-cars, emails or even telephones. They were struck by his personal discipline and simple goodness, and inspired by his preaching about Jesus.

As a diocese, we are especially blessed to have Richard as our Patron, because he reminds us, in our own poor attempts to be faithful, that the priority of those who are called to be saints is

‘to know the Lord Jesus more clearly
to love him more dearly
and to follow him more nearly.’

Two beautiful examples of Christians living. We might say that both Richard and Thérèse learnt how to go through the eye of the proverbial needle into God’s Kingdom. They are an encouragement to *us* to be persistent in trying to do the same.

I am sorry, Ian, if you feel short-changed by these diversions into the ways of sanctity, and you who have come in such numbers to encourage and pray for our new Canon, and who might have expected a detailed description of the duties of the Canon Treasurer of this Cathedral.

Well, you will have to be content with the bun and the rod, the Statutes and the Scriptures*, for they are symbolic of the ancient and unchanging purposes of this Cathedral – purposes which must always find new ways of expression, for sure, but purposes which have withstood the assaults of political and religious conflict, and will certainly continue to do so.

Purposes which – in St Thérèse’s words – speak to *everybody in the house* – that is, to all the people of Sussex, whose mother-church this is, and to all who come within its walls.

Rowan, our Archbishop, whose two visits to this Cathedral in the past year brought such inspiration to us, must have the last word. In response to the question 'Why go to Church?' the Archbishop writes:

'It is to let God the Holy Trinity, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, touch the core of our humanity and.... 'free us to be sent' in God's name, to announce healing and joy to all creation.'

That is what we are about.

** In Chichester Cathedral, the ancient custom is preserved of presenting a new member of the Chapter with a rod to symbolise the Rule of the Chapter, a loaf of common bread to symbolise the income which in ancient times he derived from his Prebend, the Statutes of the Cathedral and a copy of the Holy Bible.*