

Chichester Cathedral
750th Anniversary of the Canonisation of St Richard
(Epiphany 3) Sunday 22 January 2012, 11.00am Eucharist



A saint is not like a celebrity, or even a hero, in the modern sense. For the stories of the saints are not ultimately about *them*, but about the One whom they serve.

The great Swiss reformed theologian Karl Barth kept the same picture above his writing desk for fifty years. For him Matthias Grunewald's painting of the crucifixion was a vital visual aid, a constant reminder of his role as theologian, but it also provides the key ingredient of a saint such as St Richard. Barth saw great significance in the portrayal of John the Baptist, standing by the cross, pointing towards the suffering person of Christ. What you can't see in the service booklet is the Latin text behind his right arm: from John 3.30, in English 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

Barth was struck by Grunewald's representation of John the Baptist's hand especially (and I quote) 'his prodigious index finger. Could anyone point away from himself more impressively and completely? John serves as a sign for us too. We are to be who and what John was.' Karl Barth's prodigious unfinished masterpiece, the thirteen volume *Church Dogmatics*, unswervingly points to Christ, a commitment

backed up by his actions. In 1934 Barth drafted the Barmen Declaration, rejecting the influence of Nazism on German Christianity, and in 1935 was dismissed from his professorial post in Bonn for refusing to swear an oath to Hitler.

From its founder onwards, Christians have often fallen out with the powers that be. In 1245 a certain Richard of Wyche was elected Bishop of Chichester, to the fury of Henry III, as his own candidate had been rejected. Henry declined to recognize Richard as bishop, confiscated his episcopal estates, and threatened to punish anyone who gave him shelter. For two years Richard was homeless in his own diocese, with no income and no security. He might have fled to the continent, but preferred to look after his diocese as best he could. He was befriended by a poor priest, Simon of Tarring, who risked danger in giving shelter to a fugitive.

In 1247 the quarrel with the King was patched up, and Richard was able to enter his palace and run his diocese properly. My hunch, however, is that his initial experiences of vulnerability and insecurity in this diocese were key to ministry that followed. Richard could indeed be the austere disciplinarian portrayed in the statue outside the cathedral, but it was his overflowing compassion and joy that really singled him out. Friar Ralph Bocking, the only author of the various lives of Richard to have known him personally, says his name RICARDUS was made up of parts of three words: RIdens, CARus, and DULciS, 'laughing, beloved, and gracious'.

My predecessor as Chancellor, John Moorman, summed him up thus: "He was a very *jolly* man", a man whom you could not help loving because he seemed to love you, and everyone else, so much. If the Church had not seen fit to canonize him, he would certainly have been canonized by popular opinion, for he was just the sort of man whom people loved and revered.' But just as the people of his diocese were coming to realise how exceptional their bishop was, he died in Dover on 3rd April 1253, a few days after consecrating a chapel in honour of his patron, St Edmund of Canterbury.

He had been bishop of Chichester for just seven years. Ralph Bocking tells us '...his body was carried to Chichester and as it passed by monasteries, churches, towns or villages, the bells rang and the cortege was greeted with solemn psalms and tears ... they carried the body into the cathedral [*this* cathedral] and you would have heard music mix not inappropriately with the sounds of grief....'

It seems that the desire for Richard's canonization sprang up almost immediately. Many of you will remember the way the diocese and cathedral marked 750 years since his death, in 2003. That was the year Chapter commissioned an icon from Sergei Fyodorov, reproduced in your service booklet, showing St Richard in episcopal vestments, his hand raised in blessing, but also in supplication to the figure of Christ who appears to him from heaven. The icon thus captures the spirit of St Richard's famous prayer, which turns our attention away from Richard to the Lord whom he loved and served – for his vocation, like Karl Barth's (and ours) was to

point to Christ. This Richard did to the very end, for it was on his deathbed that he prayed, ‘Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given me, for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.’

You will know that the canonisation process involves accrediting a number of miracles. Recounting these may seem a little far-fetched to 21st century minds, but bear with me, for they carry spiritual significance. Here is a brief extract from a sermon by Cardinal Odo of Chateauroux, who examined the case for Richard’s sainthood and presented it to the Pope. Richard, Odo says, ‘calmed a storm. He caused bread and even beans to increase so that he could give them to the poor... a woman who had been paralysed for four years was cured through his merits. A boy who had been killed when a heavily laden cart ran over his stomach was revived... The print left by the wheel still remains on the boy’s stomach... He raised the son of Henry Malet from the dead. A deaf man recovered his hearing.’

It is surely no accident that this set of miracles is remarkably reminiscent of the gospel accounts of Christ, from the stilling of a storm, to the multiplication of food, to healings and even resurrections. The key to Richard’s canonisation was his Christ-likeness. The Christian vocation of pointing to Christ is to be found not only in proclaiming him in words, but in becoming more like him in heart and mind.

I haven’t mentioned the miracle most commonly depicted in representations of Richard, including the statue of him in his shrine: a chalice full of wine that was not spilled even when he dropped it. On the face of it this isn’t a Christ-like miracle, but in that it deals with the Eucharistic wine, it draws our attention to the greatest miracle of all, Christ’s self-giving love, which saw his body broken and his blood shed, an event never more powerfully painted than in Grunewald’s altarpiece, an event at the heart of our worship this morning.

Wine is central in two of our three readings today, most spectacularly in the gospel, where more than a hundred gallons of water is transformed into a superior vintage. But it is also there more subtly in that strange reading from Genesis, where the mysterious Melchizedek gives the victorious Abraham a royal meal of bread and wine. I say ‘mysterious’ because Melchizedek hardly features in the Old Testament, and yet is not only a King but also a priest, despite not belonging to the priestly tribe of Levi. In the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, Christ is seen in a similar light. Unlike the Levitical priests making their regular sacrifices, Christ’s priesthood is of the ‘order of Melchizedek’, and he makes one sacrifice only, offering his own body and blood on the cross. This is the culmination of the unimaginable generosity he has shown throughout his ministry, and in John’s gospel the first sign of this abundance of giving is in an overflowing of wine well beyond the bounds of health and safety.

This overflowing abundance is a celebration of life itself, an exuberance that even suffering and death can never snuff out. A similar generosity suffused Richard’s ministry, so that when money was short he gave away gold or silver cups, rings, horses, clothes, anything he could lay hands on. When his stewards remonstrated

with him, and implored him not to be so reckless, he replied: 'Cheer up! We still have enough to live on'.

For what happened 750 years ago this very day, I turn to Ralph Bocking once more: 'the Holy Father, attended by the cardinals and a great throng of both clergy and people, on St Vincent's day [22 January 1262], at the church of the Friars Minor in Viterbo, most devoutly and solemnly placed [Richard] in the ranks of the saints. And the Lord Pope himself pronounced the sentence of canonization amid tears of joy and everyone gave thanks to God who had made St Richard the like of the saints in glory'.

In his subsequent letter of canonization the Pope wrote: 'Let the angelic host of heaven now exult, let the divine mysteries exult... let the saints exult in glory ... let Mother Church exult... let England exult ... let the church of Chichester exult and rejoice that she has deserved so great a pastor..'. And so here in Chichester, all these centuries later, we do so exult, and are glad that, in the words of Revelation, Richard's righteous deeds are part of the fine linen adorning the bride, at the marriage supper of the lamb.

A final St Richard of Chichester story. Once, celebrating Candlemas at Cakeham, he joined in a procession outside the church, each member carrying a lighted candle. A gust of wind blew all the candles out, but the procession went on. Suddenly it was noticed that the bishop's candle was alight again. 'Who lit my candle?' said Richard. 'No one, my lord', came the reply. Richard looked again at the candle, then put his finger to his lips and said, 'Not a word'.

Richard, not a celebrity, not a hero, but a saint, did not want the focus to be on him, but on the true light of the world, Jesus Christ. He knew his vocation was to point to Christ, and to become like Christ, in his particular thirteenth century circumstances. In the last century Karl Barth sought to do likewise, finding inspiration in the prodigious index finger of John the Baptist. We in Chichester in the twenty first century can be additionally inspired by our Saint Richard, and learn from him that Christ must increase, and we decrease. Let us pray with him today, 'O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly.' AMEN