



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND AND WALES

## Prisons Week: Sermon Outline

PRISONS WEEK, 20-26 NOVEMBER 2011

**In Jesus, who is God made Man, God makes known his unconditional love for us. God continues to bring his love into the world today, through each other, through the presence of Jesus in each other. We discover our dignity as Children of God, through the loving presence of others in our lives.**

The great Saint Francis of Assisi said that we Christians should preach the love of God always, but only sometimes by using words! Walking around the town of Assisi, the presence of Francis, increasingly attuned to the Lord, would speak wordlessly of God's loving acceptance and tenderness for all people. This sense of presence is about being attuned to Truth – the Truth of God, the Truth about self and the truth about others. This has a welcoming power which draws others into a loving encounter, respecting my own mystery and integrity and that of others.

Our lives tend to be shaped by words and ideas. Let our priorities shift! When with another person, what matters is simply being present and honouring that person's dignity and vulnerability. Let's have less concern about what lies on the surface, less concern about what I can do and how much success I can produce. Simply 'being' is more important than 'doing,' when I am with another person.

People held in our prisons usually can't produce evidence of great accomplishments; they have no prestige to be proud of. But they are a powerful witness to the truth of all our lives. In their vulnerability, they are saying "I can only live if you see who I really am, if you surround me with love, otherwise my life is useless and I am a burden." We tend to keep up the illusion of usefulness and the illusion of action, but the fact is that Love finally determines the course of our lives and love alone allows me to see deeply and clearly.

Meeting another human being is a strange and beautiful thing. But we can be together and not really meet and not really see the other person! We can live in the same house, sit at the same table, kneel in the same pew but not meet each other. We can even offer apparent tenderness, but not really meet each other. Yet, truly seeing and meeting each other is crucial for the transformation of brokenness into wholeness. The only way we can truly see another human being, is through loving eyes:

There is a play and a film called 'The Elephant Man' based on the true story of John Merrick who lived in England in the late 19th century. John was afflicted with a terrible disease that left him physically deformed. He was hardly able to walk. Perhaps the most terrible aspect of his illness was that his head was hugely oversized. This led people, to call him "the elephant man." They only saw him on the outside. The play opens with John, the elephant man, on show as a freak, in a fairground. People line up to stare at him, to laugh at him, to make fun of him. It was such a disrespectful experience for John, but the only way he could earn a living.

As the play unfolds, a doctor meets John and hires him to be a live model, when he lectures to medical students. The elephant man sits in a chair and the doctor stands next to him pointing and poking at the deformities as he lectures. The students and the doctor are only interested in what lies on the outside.

As the play goes on, something remarkable happens. The audience become more and more aware that on the outside John is ugly, a joke, someone you wouldn't want living near you! But at the same time, if you continue to look closely at him, you see that on the inside John is beautiful – he has a peace, a kind heart, a love for people, an appreciation of beauty and goodness and above all he has a Faith in God. At the same time, however, the audience also notices that on the outside the doctor looks good – handsome, wealthy and in good health. But, on the inside the doctor is really ugly – he has little ability to be loving, little appreciation of beauty and goodness and worst of all, no Faith in God. The audience become aware that that doctor is afflicted with a spiritual disease far worse than the elephant mans' physical disease. The doctor's heart is without love.

The audience discovers that the important thing in life is not what we appear to be on the outside, but what we are on the inside. Also that to see another person and to meet another person means looking beyond what lies on the outside of their lives and instead discovering their true beauty which at first is hidden.