



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Mass of Thanksgiving

Cardinal Vincent Nichols' Homily

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, 2 MARCH 2014

'Think of the flowers growing in the field; they never have to work or spin; yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these.'

Well in the last few days I have been in some very fine regalia: the scarlet robes of a Cardinal, receiving the scarlet biretta from Pope Francis, the splendid vestments and new mitre for the Solemn celebration of Mass at the tomb of St Peter. Fine regalia indeed, but, we are told, nothing compared to the dignity with which our Heavenly Father clothes each one of us his beloved children.

The days of the Consistories in Rome were just so wonderful. The joy and delight we experienced there is a joy and delight echoed, repeated, intensified here this morning. They were days of profound unity with Pope Francis who always knows how to reach out and touch our hearts.

In the course of those days we celebrated Mass at the tomb of St Peter, at the tomb of St Paul and gathered round the relics of the martyr priests of the English College. So we touched the very foundation of the unity of our faith in the person of Peter, we touched the raw energy for mission of St Paul and the courageous, joyous dedication of the young priests preparing to come to these shores in hostile times. It is just marvellous to have with us today the ceremonial crozier of Cardinal William Allen, founder of that college in the sixteenth century, the pectoral cross of Cardinal Reginald Pole who died in 1558 as Archbishop of Canterbury and, most precious of all, the episcopal ring of St John Fisher, the only Cardinal, I think, to shed his blood in martyrdom and a great hero for me.

The witness of these saints is the finest regalia, the most precious possession, of the Church and the greatest encouragement for us all in the life of faith we share.

In the letter I received from Pope Francis appointing me as Cardinal, he reminded me that this is not a promotion, nor an honour. It is a call to service. In particular, it is a call to serve his office, as Successor of Peter, in the task of nurturing the unity of the Church in faithfulness to Christ, our Lord. He did not invite us to become 'princes of the Church' or, as he said, to think of ourselves 'as entering a court.'

This reflects exactly the words of St Paul we have just heard:

'People must think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God.'

So that is the task which faces me: with a broader horizon and a larger heart to try to open to all the mysteries of God. And here I have to remember that the word 'mystery' does not mean a puzzle which only Poirot can solve, but the plan of God, formed from the beginning, by which God longs to include everyone in the embrace of his love and grace.

This is the task of Christ's servants, knowing that it is Jesus himself who is the Way, the Truth and the Life of that love and grace. So in stepping out to show our faith in practical love we are always ready to point to him who alone is its origin and fulfilment. As Christ's servants we speak not only to Jesus but

also of him to others. He wants to use us to reach out to all the beloved children of his Heavenly Father, inviting them into the joy and consolation of faith. That is our mission, our calling.

And then St Paul says this:

'What is expected of stewards (servants) is that each one should be found worthy of his trust.'

This is much more troubling. The high expectations that surround the position of Cardinal are not easy to live up to. I will do my best. Yet I rely on your love, your prayers and your forgiveness. They are a marvellous reflection of, or a sharing in, the mercy of God himself. So this morning I turn the warmth of your welcome to me into an expression of support and encouragement. I turn your joy and delight into a reservoir of prayer which I ask you to refill each day as I constantly draw on its waters for my survival.

For a final thought let me return to the Gospel. There Jesus tells us, tells me, not to worry, not to be fearful. His instruction is direct: set your hearts first on the kingdom of the Heavenly Father and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well.

What does this mean in practice? The righteousness of the Father, the perfection of love and truth, is among us in the person of Jesus. This kingdom is to be found in Jesus, who not only announces the Kingdom but is also its presence, its fulfilment, its king. To set our hearts first on this kingdom, then, is to set our hearts first of all, and above all, on Jesus. It means that from our first waking moment of each day, to the closing of our eyes, we open our hearts to him. Each day, and day by day, we set out to let him guide our thoughts, our way of seeing those around us, our ways of acting and reacting to them. When we are led by Christ in all we do, then we are entering his kingdom where we will find all that our hearts truly desire and all that we truly need.

And this is as true for a cardinal as it is for each one of you. So let us do just that! Together let us set our hearts on The Lord each day, allowing ourselves to be shaped and formed by him in all we do and say. Then we shall know his peace to the last.

A big thank you to those who have made special efforts to be with me at this Mass of Thanksgiving. A warm welcome to our visitors. Please remember this day, as I surely will, and remember to pray for me always. Amen

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster