

Archbishop Vincent Nichols' Homily

Big IF G8 Rally Ecumenical Service

Westminster Central Hall, Saturday 8 June 2013

I am grateful for this opportunity to speak at this important act of prayer and worship. Today we gather to lend our voice to all who are joining in this IF campaign in preparation for the G8 Summit and the grave responsibilities it places on our leaders and on us too.

We have already heard much about the issues facing the world in terms of the terrible hunger suffered by so many. During the rest of the day, especially in Hyde Park, much more will be said, making clear the terrible plight of so many of our human family.

The four 'ifs' at the heart of this campaign are not the 'if only's' of wishful thinking. They are possible if we are prepared to work together to develop the international cooperation and both corporate and personal responsibility needed for truly beneficial economic activity and growth. If poor farmers were not put off their land but helped to farm it well for the production of food and not fuel; if tax evasion and aggressive avoidance were eliminated; if there was greater transparency by government and major corporations, especially regarding resource extracting companies; if lifesaving aid were made available when a crisis strikes, then so much of the world's hunger could indeed be addressed. There is no shortage of food but we have to be willing to change and pay the costs that will enable everyone to gain access to what is required for a healthy and dignified life.

Today's objectives are achievable. They are urgently needed. We are hungry for change. So we add our voices to those gathering this afternoon and around the world.

This is a gathering of the followers of Jesus. We have, therefore, a distinctive voice. And the readings which we have just heard make clear that distinctiveness. As followers of the Lord, the voice we add today is different. Its starting point and its overall vision are different. Its motivation and its source of dedication are different. And, in a public discourse that is increasingly uncomfortable with difference, we must be sure of ourselves and not at all apologetic in our difference. For the distinctiveness of the Christian Gospel is one which brings life in its fullness. That is our task, our joy and our witness.

The first reading we heard, from the Acts of the Apostles, speaks eloquently of the characteristics of the first communities of the disciples of the Lord. Those communities come across in this reading as attractive and alert: goods were held in common; the needy and the weak were supported for distribution was according to need and not according to power or prestige.

But it tells us more than that. It tells us that the starting point of the community was its faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles; a mutual commitment flowed from that faithfulness together with the practice of the 'Breaking of Bread' and daily prayer. It also tells us that the end result of a community life of this kind went beyond the meeting of hunger and need. The end result was that many more people came to see and live their lives in relationship to God.

It is dangerous to separate the characteristics of the human community we would all like to see and develop from the source and purpose of those very characteristics. A commitment to the human community without a rootedness in truth – the teaching of the apostles – in selflessness, in faithful liturgy and in prayer runs the risk of being blown in the wind. Perhaps it is this rootedness which we, in our Christian calling, offer and ensure, as our particular gift.

Here we see our challenge. We are to hold together our faith and love for the Lord with our commitment to today's cause, and many other causes, too. For us they are inseparable. It is not as if my faith in Jesus is a private matter, stirring my conscience and strengthening my effort in some hidden way. It is that, of course. But it is so much more. It is an invitation, a summons, for all people to come to appreciate the wholeness of life and its wholeness as intended and sustained by God, in all its dignity, beauty, vulnerability and sublime destiny. You and I, here, today, are the bearers of that summons and not simply foot-soldiers of a very good secular cause, worthy as it is of our support.

The Gospel passage, too, is a challenge. In the course of that long Emmaus Road the mind-set of the disciples is radically changed. Their relationship with Jesus brings about a transformation in their expectations. They set out expressing their hope that Jesus was the one 'to set Israel free.' The freedom they sought was from Roman rule, from oppression, from forced conformity to patterns of life which were inimical, from punishing taxes and from poverty. They were proper expectations and worthy of support, as are ours today.

But on that road, those expectations were exceeded, made so much deeper and wider. Now there was a vision of the fullness of life which not only embraced this world but affirmed a far greater destiny of life beyond the grave. On that journey Jesus emerged as the one who not only had conquered death but who also was now with them, inviting them to an unthinkable destiny: that of a sharing in the very life of God, a far greater adventure that they had ever imagined and a gift that only God can give. And the gift is given in and through Christ Jesus our Lord. There is no other way. On that Emmaus Road the disciples really did find their true voice, the true and dramatic witness that they were to give and for which they were going to die.

May we find our voices today.

Pope Francis is a man of startling words and actions. He has spoken of us being a Church of the poor and for the poor. That is so true, so challenging. And it must begin with me. Can I learn to recognise my own poverty, standing before the Lord, so that I always come to see the world's poor not as an object of my attention or commitment but as my brother and sister. Only when I see my poverty am I truly close to them. Only when I express my poverty in a search for mercy from the Lord, am I defended from the danger of treating others as simply needing my generosity or as another reason for my commitment to radical change in our systems. Rather, when I know that I am poor, when I see a brother and sister in the materially poor, when I recognise in them the very flesh of Christ, then I am in the right place to raise my voice today on behalf of the hungry of the world.

What we strive for today, then, is that this world of poverty might become a world for the poor. But for that to come about we must put in first place in our own lives the living Lord and the love and mercy he brings.

We started our service with one of my favourite hymns. Its themes come from deep within the tradition of Anglo-Saxon spirituality. We sang over and over again of the priority of God. He is Lord of my heart, first in my heart, my best thought, my light, my wisdom, my breastplate and sword, my shelter and tower, my treasure. He is my one true word. In all that we do, say, sing and express today let that one true Word be clear. Then our witness will be sound and lasting. Then we will be close to heaven's joy and heaven's bright sun.

Amen