



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Homily: Archbishop Longley

ANNUAL CIVIC MASS

FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING, ST CHAD'S CATHEDRAL, BIRMINGHAM

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Today, as we come together for the annual Civic Mass, Pope Francis is celebrating Mass at St Peter's in Rome for the conclusion of the Year of Faith. The Catholic Church has been observing this Year of Faith as a way of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. One of the principal aims of that Council was to enable the Church to reach out in dialogue and co-operation with the world around her and to seek partnerships to build up the Kingdom of God.

Fifty years on we still need to look at the world not as an enemy that is indifferent or even hostile to the message of the Gospel but as the place where God's salvation has already reached into people's lives through the love of his Son Jesus Christ. The Scriptures remind us that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that we might be healed and saved. As a demonstration of our Christian faith we need above all to find ever fresh ways to show the love of God for the world he made and cherishes.

As the city prepares for Christmas the presence of the crib with its nativity scene in the German Market is a powerful reminder of God's love come in to the world through the birth of his Son Jesus. The way of Jesus was to express the love of his Father not only by his teaching but above all by his deeds. Part of the appeal of Pope Francis is his ability to show by small, personal gestures that God cares about those who have the greatest challenges in life.

It is significant that the reading from St Luke's Gospel on this Feast of Christ the King shows Jesus at the end of his earthly life, hanging in agony on the cross. Alongside the crib the cross is the most powerful reminder of God's love come into the world. While we were still sinners Jesus died on the cross as an expression of God's completely self-giving love.

It was one of the two criminals who were being executed with Jesus who recognised the truth about him. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. This man, whose life was regarded as worthless and disposable, received the most extraordinary assurance of God's love and forgiveness from Christ: I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Fifty years ago, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI said: Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses..... It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelise the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity.

As the Catholic Church identifies the legacy of the Year of Faith one of the most important themes is the relationship between faith and loving deeds, between proclaiming and teaching our faith and witnessing to it by our actions. The proclamation of the Gospel binds the Church to be with the poor. Christians recognise this faith in action in the generous outreach of the other faith communities of our city with whom we witness to God's love for the world.

Today, during our celebration the worlds of faith and public service that we represent come together and they overlap as we reflect on the lives and needs of our fellow citizens. The interests and well-being of our fellow citizens is a compelling motive for your own involvement in civic life and public affairs. The faith communities are keen to find fresh opportunities to work with others in order to serve the common good.

I echo the approach of my brother bishops that we should not to lose sight of the moral imperative of caring for those most in need, while acting fairly and impartially. Catholic social teaching reminds us that the key to social development lies in placing the good of the human person centre-stage. However, creating a new culture of social responsibility requires a conversion of heart and mind. [It] cannot be achieved by government or policy initiative alone. If it is to succeed, this project must...become a common endeavour owned by society as a whole. In this our Churches and faith communities have a significant part to play.

The faith communities in this city are often among the first to recognise social needs within our local communities. Many of them have initiated and are involved in local projects that are making a practical contribution towards building a new culture of social responsibility. One of these project is the Anawim Women's Centre working in Balsall Heath and in the wider community.

All the women served by Anawim have multiple and complex needs, which may include past and current offending, prostitution and drug and alcohol abuse. Most are experiencing the effects of social deprivation, domestic violence and difficulties with housing and several have mental and physical health issues.

A significant number of the women have been through the care system and those with children typically struggle with a variety of parenting issues. Anawim provides a full Family Support Service which operates an on-site crèche and it also provides Alternatives to Custody enabling women with children to attend activities at the Centre while their children are cared for in the crèche.

In the last year Anawim worked with 412 women who between them had 518 children. Nearly half of those children – 252 – did not live with their mothers, 145 having been placed in local authority care at an estimated cost of £200,000 per child. Through Anawim's family and parenting support 33 of these children have been successfully returned to their mother. Also last year there was a very low re-offending rate of 1% for the women being helped by Anawim.

It is worth hearing the testimony of one of the women recently assisted at Anawim: Last time I got 18 months' Probation and an SAR (Specified Activities Order) – 30 days at Anawim – for shoplifting food from Sainsbury's. At first I thought Anawim was like any other place, but people here care. Netty is my worker and she got me to do meditation....I started trying it out and it helped me – it made me stop and think. I like it that there are nuns here, because of all the good they've done. When I used to work on the streets nuns used to come and give us cups of soup. It gives you something – you know they care – and you can start to put your trust in other people.

That is only a glimpse into one of many faith-inspired projects that seek to serve others as an expression of the love of God for this often chaotic and disordered world. This is the world that cries out with the good thief: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. It is the world that God loved so much that he sent his only Son. May the blessing of God's Son, born a helpless child at Bethlehem and forever with us as a Servant-King, be upon all who serve this city in public office and to further the common good.

Most Reverend Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham