



BISHOPRIC OF THE FORCES

Silver Jubilee

HOMILY: BISHOP RICHARD MOTH

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL & ST GEORGE, ALDERSHOT, 29 SEPTEMBER 2012

We gather for this celebration at an important moment in the life of the Church. The “Year of Faith” declared by Pope Benedict XVI, is soon to begin. This marks the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The change in legislation represented the Apostolic Constitution *Spirituali militum curae*, promulgated by Blessed John Paul II, was, in many senses, one of the fruits of that Council.

As a result of that Constitution, we now celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the Bishopric – one of the Military Ordinariates of the world – comparable to a Diocese, determined, not by territory, but by its people wherever in the world they happen to be. The Bishopric, through the service of its chaplains, seeks to ensure the provision of the very best operational, spiritual and pastoral support, primarily for Catholic servicemen and women and their families wherever, whenever and in whatever form is needed; and additionally to respond to the needs of anyone of any creed or none, who turns to a Catholic chaplain for support.

The archangels, whose feast we keep today, are God’s messengers to his people. They worship before the throne of the Father and call us to both worship and witness. These two themes are at the heart of the Bishopric’s mission, for the role of this community is to be a sign of witness - witness to hope in the midst of struggle, danger and conflict - and the Catholic Community of worship, grounded in the Sacraments, for the military community.

Peace is at the heart of the life of the Church, for it is the message of the Risen Christ to the world. Blessed John Paul II’s Constitution, then, makes reference to a highly significant paragraph in the final Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, The Constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the Modern World:

“Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honourably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nations and the maintenance of peace.”ⁱ

This is a most wonderful expression of the place of our Armed Services personnel and their families in the life of our society and of the wider world. Servants of security and freedom, contributors to the common good, charged with the maintenance of peace. This is a high calling – so often a difficult and dangerous one – but it is, above all else, a calling to the service of peace.

Living the life of Faith in these difficult and dangerous circumstances can be a real challenge. It is the same, in so many respects, for loved ones who carry the burden of separation and the anxiety that comes as family wait for those on operations to return home. Faith is also a source of consolation and strength in times of hardship and many returning from operations testify to the real desire for prayer shown by so many. For some, that experience will mark the first tentative steps in the encounter with the God of love. Our chaplains hold a very special place in encouraging and supporting that journey and we give very special thanks today for all that chaplains have done and continue to do in their vital ministry.

It is in this context that I encourage you to reflect on today’s Gospel. Jesus offers the Centurion to us as a model of Faith – “Nowhere in Israel have I found faith like this.”ⁱⁱ The Lord chooses a soldier, a military man, as a model of faith.

i Gaudium et spes 79

ii Luke, 7:9

Here we have a military man, living away from home, amidst a people of different culture and faith as a member of an occupying force. Despite all of these things, the centurion was able to step beyond the limits of his situation, firstly to build the synagogue for the people of Capernaum and then to embrace the message of the Word made flesh, the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ.

What is more, it seems that he applied his military way of thinking to his approach to faith. “I say to one man go and he goes.ⁱⁱⁱ” For the Centurion, it was straightforward. He believed. Jesus could do it. All that was required was a simple word.

The centurion was also a man of great humility – no doubt that particular kind of humility that can come through the deep experience of the highs and lows of the human condition in all its fallibility. He recognised his own unworthiness. “I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.^{iv}” It is not for nothing that we pray the Centurion’s prayer before receiving the Lord in Holy Communion, for, like that soldier, we are not worthy to have the Lord in our house. So, every time we are at Mass, we pray the prayer of a military man.

The centurion is, too, a man of authentic hope – hope for the people amongst whom he lived and hope for his servant. It was a hope based on the promptings of the Holy Spirit, a hope that grew out of a faith that was simple and real.

So, the example of the centurion has much to teach us: Openness to grace and the gift of Faith, simplicity, humility and an honest, matter-of-fact realism about in his encounter with Jesus from which we would do well to learn.

I call upon everyone here today to recognise and rejoice in the examples of Faith that we see in our Armed Forces personnel and their families. It is a faith that is lived out in difficult and trying circumstances. This faith may not be expressed in theological language, but it is real, humble, honest, hope-filled and expressed in the most practical of terms.

We must pray, too, for those for whom the experience of conflict and the pressures of military life make it difficult for them to be open to the example of the centurion of the Gospel. May they experience the consolation, strength and sense of purpose that is engendered through faith.

The presence of so many brother bishops here in this Cathedral today is a testimony to the witness of our Armed Forces community and the special place this community holds in the Church and in the wider world. It is also a testimony to the life and ministry of our chaplains, who do so much to bring the message of Gospel hope to personnel and families. Their task on operations - on land, at sea, in the air - is a challenging one and we give thanks today for the service of so many chaplains who have served with courage and perseverance over so many years. On their behalf, I thank you all for the support you give to them, through prayer and action and I thank the bishops for recognizing the value of their ministry and for releasing fine priests to serve in the Bishopric.

Jubilees are not just about looking back, or even looking at the present – they are also about looking to the future and, at a time when the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom is undergoing change, it is vital that we look to the future of chaplaincy and, indeed, of the Bishopric. The continuing pastoral care of the Armed Forces community is not an optional extra – as I have said on many occasions – rather it is a vital element in the care of those who are called to be servants of the security and freedom of nations, to truly contribute to the common good of the nations and the maintenance of peace. To carry out this vital mission we shall need more chaplains and further resources together with the continuing support of the Church in this country – support that is so evident in today’s celebration.

This Military Ordinariate has enjoyed so many blessings over these last twenty-five years – and over the many years that preceded Blessed John Paul II’s Apostolic Constitution: the fine example of faith of so many service personnel and their families; the selfless ministry of so many chaplains down through the ages. Let us seek the intercession of Mary our Mother, St. Michael and St. George for the Bishopric and for all who serve in our Armed Forces. May the Lord continue to bless us all as we move forward at the service of peace.

iii Luke, 7:8

iv Luke, 7:7