

20th September 2009

25th Sunday in the Year of Mark

This last Wednesday and very early Thursday morning was a moving and privileged experience for a number of us. We travelled to our Cathedral in Portsmouth for a number of celebrations in honour of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. It was an honour, as one of the Cathedral canons, to welcome the reliquary as it arrived on Wednesday morning and to be able to lead a reflection in the early hours of Thursday morning.



Lots of people came from all over the South of England and the event received national press coverage. Sadly, as is so often the case, the media failed to understand the true significance of the event. True the reliquary does contain some of her mortal remains but not for any morbid or superstitious reason. They came as a tangible and visible reminder of a woman's life and teaching which has had and is having profound influence on the lives of many and on the Church as a whole. In fact the Church has said that her teaching contains a message for every human being.

Thérèse's life and witness stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of the disciples who were arguing on the way about which of them was the greatest. It is difficult to criticise them as they tried to rescue something positive from what was turning out to be a very bleak situation. This was the third time that Jesus had spoken about his death, which while opposition to his radical teaching was increasing, was something the disciples found hard to understand and for some reason they were frightened to ask him for clarification. They probably felt that they should have understood something which was escaping them. Jesus so often spoke in parables and they had to struggle to work out what he was saying. These words about death and resurrection did not sound like a parable they sounded direct and clear and it was impossible to find a more comfortable interpretation. Whether it was fear or plain ignorance they did not understand at all. They were looking for true greatness and Jesus words about suffering and death did not fit at all. They thought, as so many of us do, that true greatness is to be found in status, power, control, wealth possessions and the ability to choose exactly what we want and when we want it.

For Jesus and for Thérèse of Lisieux, true human greatness was to be found in a completely different direction. Jesus taught, and we have the good fortune to know and believe, that Jesus became truly great by following resolutely the path of suffering and death which brought him to resurrection. The cross is

about the absolute opposite to power, control, status and privilege. It is about shame and rejection, weakness and failure. A message which is against so many things which are important in our own time.



And perhaps this is why so many find the message of Thérèse so hard to understand. She was acutely aware that the path of suffering which Jesus took was the experience of God. In his death and resurrection we see Jesus giving himself in love to the Father and to us so that suffering, loss, failure and death become the place where love is divine and most effective. Strangely they become the way to true greatness which is what the resurrection of Jesus establishes. Joined to Jesus as we are, and he is are only hope, the path of weakness and ultimately death, becomes the way to true greatness for us all. Like the disciples we can find this message so difficult to understand. How can vulnerability and weakness be the way to true greatness in beauty and fullness of life?

This time last week I was in South Australia. The friends with whom I was staying took me to Phillip Island to see the penguins. I had not seen penguins before and knew nothing about them. To see them we had to visit their colony at night when it was dark. During the day they spend all the time in the sea catching fish for themselves and for their young which are waiting on land. At night, after dark, they return to land which is when we saw them. The penguins gradually emerged from the sea and waited before they crossed the beach. To guard against the threat of attack from predators they waited until a group of 50 or 60 had gathered and then they charged ahead for their colony and the burrows in the ground. They were like little human beings because they walk on two feet and are erect. With heads down and a slight waddle they looked like human beings in the rush hour making their way to work. As they reached the colony they stumbled and got lost and went in all directions. They fed their young and made love or got lost and had to search for their nests. I tell this story because the penguins which were small, vulnerable and always in considerable danger were absolutely beautiful and they were beautiful because they weak and vulnerable. And for me that was a powerful and moving experience. Living with constant threats to their existence made them beautiful and the danger and frequent disaster had made them what they were.



As Jesus speaks about his being put to death and his resurrection, let us accept the challenge he offers us. That the way to life and fullness, truth and beauty is to be found in the path of self emptying, letting go of our lives and ultimately death and resurrection.

To make the point clear Jesus takes a little child and sets the child in front of the disciples who had been arguing about true greatness. As a sign of respect and affection he put his arms around the child. The disciples would have been horrified. Jesus was showing the child to be the model of service and relationship with God and for them that would have been impossible. It is difficult for us to appreciate but in Jesus' time children had no status, no power, they were to exist rather like furniture. To be without status or power, to empty ourselves of all these things is to become the presence of Christ and to allow him to be made visible in us and to work in us.

Jesus is saying to us all that if we want to be first, if we want to be truly great we must follow his way. St Paul describes it beautifully "It is, then, about my weakness that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong".