

Homily for Feast of St Cuthbert Mayne –
Buckfast Abbey, 29th Nov. 2017

In the providence of God, this Wednesday of the last week in Ordinary time coincides with the 440th Anniversary of the Death of St Cuthbert Mayne, and so we are given these readings from the Book of Daniel and the Gospel of Luke. In the Book of Daniel, we hear the narrative of a young man filled with eloquence and wisdom who was able to speak confidently and boldly to kings and nobles. In the Gospel, the Lord reminds us that eloquence and wisdom will be given to His followers whenever they need it, and most especially in times of suffering or trial.

In this vein, we want to thank most particularly His Eminence, Cardinal Vincent Nichols for being with us for this important anniversary for we he, too, is a man endowed with eloquence and wisdom. Your Eminence, we thank you for being among us and leading us in our commemoration of this great saint. This beautiful Abbey Church has its own eloquence and a wisdom and I want to thank Abbot David and the community for facilitating our presence here.

On the altar is the relic of our beloved saint, kept lovingly in this Diocese these past 440 years. It is so good that as a Diocese we can gather around him – Bishop, priests, deacons, Religious and lay faithful and give glory to God for such faithful witness and courage.

We know that one of the bits of evidence that unjustly condemned St Cuthbert to death, was the possession of an Agnus Dei. This was a symbol of his priestly office which he wore around his neck, consisting of the image of the Lamb of God, sealed upon a piece of wax which had come from the Paschal candle blessed by the Pope. It was not only a tangible link to Cuthbert Mayne's communion with the Holy Father, but also points to the sacrifice of the innocent lamb, Jesus Christ, who went to death on the Cross.

Today, as we keep the memory of this great and well-loved saint, we are able to see where his martyrdom can be truly rooted. It is founded on the death of Jesus, on His supreme sacrifice of love, consummated on the Cross, that we might have life (cf. Jn 10: 10). It is these two truths – the sacrifice of Jesus manifest anew in the sacrifice of the Mass and communion with the Holy Father – for which he and so many others died.

St Cuthbert's strength to face martyrdom, came from his deep and intimate union with Jesus Christ. We know that in the months he spent in the dark prison cell before his death, St. Cuthbert never lost heart. How often he must

have meditated on those words of Our Lord, “Your endurance will win you your lives.” (Lk 21:19). St Cuthbert spent his long wait in encouraging his fellow prisoners. He often fell on his knees to say his prayers, which lasted far into the night. On one occasion, just after midnight, it is recorded, St. Cuthbert was meditating and praying, and suddenly a bright light shone around him lighting up the terrible wall of the dungeon. It awakened the other prisoners who wondered where the light was coming from. St. Cuthbert gently told them to go back to sleep and would not talk about it the following day. A miraculous consolation had been given to him in his dismal dungeon. Indeed, the Holy Spirit was preparing him for an eloquence beyond human speech.

That eloquence came in the manner of his going to death. “In manus tuas, Domine...Into your hands Lord”. These were the final words he prayed from the pulpit of his execution. We know they were words prayed by St Stephen, protomartyr of the whole Church, who himself was mirroring the words of Our Lord from the Cross.

The call to martyrdom is not the result of human effort but the response to a call of God. It is a gift of His grace that enables a person, out of love, to give his life for Christ and for the Church, and hence for the world. We are amazed at the accounts of St Cuthbert’s calmness and courage in confronting death. God’s power is fully expressed in weakness, in the poverty of him who entrusted himself to His Lord, and placed his hope in Him alone (cf. 2 Cor 12: 9).

Many Christians in our world still face the real possibility of shedding their blood for what they believe. We need only think of the situation in parts of Nigeria, or India or Pakistan, in Syria or Iraq, in China or Sri Lanka. We may not need to shed our blood as St Cuthbert did here in this Diocese, or as so many of our brothers and sisters are doing in the streets of Mosel, Aleppo or Abuja. But there is still the need for our witness and our example, because we live in a society and a culture where the person of Jesus Christ is still not known or accepted. We face the challenge of often being regarded as irrelevant in public life, as though faith has nothing to say to our society or our world. There is a definite move in much of our country to confine faith only to the private realm. Sometimes, we encounter misunderstanding or even ridicule.

There is a need for bravery, for courage, as much today as there was in the 16th century. What the martyrs of the 16th century died for, was not a recognition in society or a peaceful life for Christians in a secular society. What they died for was that their countrymen and women might draw closer to Jesus in all of His beauty, and to recognise that we can encounter Him in the community of His followers, the Church. Although, we do not have the same dangers or the same

sufferings to endure - at least not yet - we still need that faith, that confidence in God, which martyrs like St Cuthbert showed.

May we draw closer to the Lord ourselves in a daily pattern of prayer and conversion so that we can indeed know that He is at our side. And in this way He will give us the light, the strength and the freedom to witness to Him. "Into your hands, Lord.....In manus Tuas, Domine."

St Cuthbert Mayne...Pray for us.

+Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth