

First Vespers of St Cuthbert Mayne
'Being a Missionary Disciple'
Diocese of Plymouth
28th November 2017

There are words of St Paul that often gnaw away at my conscience, especially on occasions as splendid as this. St Paul cries out: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Cor. 9:16). His warning troubles me, as I am sure it does many bishops, priests and deacons, as we prepare our homilies and speeches, or sometimes skimp doing so. So a somewhat troubled Cardinal stands before you this evening, knowing that there is a high standard to be met.

But it's not just the ordained who should listen to St Paul's warning. Let me spread my unease more widely! The great teaching document of the Second Vatican Council on the nature and tasks of the Church, the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, quotes these very same words of St Paul in its second chapter, on 'The People of God'. The chapter tells us that 'the obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his state' (LG17). Evangelisation, in other words, is not an optional extra for any Christian person – it is integral to the living out of our faith. All of us are facing the same challenge: Woe to us all if we do not preach the Gospel!

And that, of course, poses an obvious question. How? How can I bring others to know and love Our Lord Jesus Christ?

How can I do this in a culture that is so closed to many things about our faith, seeing faith simply as a problem to be solved and not as a great resource to be discovered afresh?

There are many ways to answer that question! Pope Francis is so helpful when he calls us to that task. He presents it as a positive challenge reminding us first of all of its joy before addressing the problems to be overcome. He writes: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew' (Evangelii Gaudium 1). It is on this basis that he gives us our positive self-definition, the phrase by which we are to be known.

His title for each one of us is that we are to be 'missionary disciples'. This is his development for our own times of the vision of the Church as 'The People of God'. This is the way in which he unfolds that earlier definition, bringing something dynamic and outward-going to our very self-understanding. He is also reassuring, if we immediately feel inadequate to the task. If we worry that our knowledge of the faith is too patchy to be of much use in bringing others to Christ, he says, 'anyone who has experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love' (EG120).

So if we are to be 'missionary disciples', an experience of the love of God is an essential pre-requisite. Our love of God

cannot flourish if we do not pray. Prayer, the raising of the mind and heart to God, is central to our encounter with Him. As we spend time in prayer, we open our hearts to His presence, and our minds to what He asks of us. Personal prayer, built into the fabric of the day, keeps us constantly alive to the reality that Jesus accompanies us always, through good times and bad. Prayer together reminds us that, in baptism, we are bound together in this new identity, into the Body of Christ, and called to holiness in union with Jesus and each other. So public prayer nourishes the Church, nurturing us in this new calling. Indeed, through its beauty and evocative silence, the prayer of the Church can itself become a means of spreading the Good News, especially when there is a thoughtful welcome offered to the visitor.

Prayer opens us to the reality that missionary disciples are agents of God in their work – it is God who begins the good work, and brings it to fulfilment.

Talk of ‘agents’ might take us back to earlier times when Catholics were ‘agents’ in more senses than one, to the days when holding fast to the faith was a clandestine and risky business. Today’s celebration is a service of Vespers of St Cuthbert Mayne. Though he lived long before the phrase became well-known, he was the embodiment of the ‘missionary disciple’. Indeed, he was the first priest who was trained at the seminary that Cardinal William Allen had founded at Douai in France in 1568, to suffer and die for the faith on the English mission. He was executed on 30

November 1577, 440 years ago. He is rightly remembered for the courage and fidelity he showed and the witness he gave.

Just one year ago, at World Youth Day in 2016, Pope Francis called on young people to be the signs and carriers, the agents, of hope in our world. Then he gave this instruction: If you want to be people of hope, then go home and talk to your grandparents. 'A young person who cannot remember', he said, 'is not hope for the future'.

There is much we can learn from our 'grandparents' in faith, not least St Cuthbert Mayne. For him, and for all Martyrs, their faith was not something they had as an accident of birth; nor was it a cultural or social phenomenon. It was simply a relationship, a friendship, with Christ. In St Cuthbert Mayne's case, it led him to let go of the esteem and security of a fellowship at Oxford University, and to embrace instead a path that he knew well could lead to social ignominy and a horrible death. He could not, and would not, have done this without such a deep and special friendship with Jesus Christ, cultivated and sustained in prayer.

For St Cuthbert Mayne, prayer and action were inseparable, even to the moment of his execution. For us, as missionary disciples, it is so important that prayer does not exist in a bubble. We should constantly guard against being 'functional atheists', our friendship with God playing no part in our daily lives and choices beyond the hour a week we spend at Mass.

As we seek to avoid this sort of mindset, as we struggle with the calling to be missionary disciples, we do well to remember three qualities that, traditionally, have helped many to know God better. These are truth, beauty, and goodness. Our search for truth will, inevitably, lead us to a desire to become more familiar with the truths of our faith: 'we want to have better training, a deepening love, and a clearer witness to the Gospel' (EG121). This pathway of truth is also becoming more urgent in our society, in which we now sense a vacuum of shared meaning, the absence of any common narrative by which we make sense and give shape to our lives. We are becoming weary of a shallow consensus that tells us just to do our own thing, especially as we see how intolerant such a stance has become when challenged by reasoned disagreement or alternative conviction.

The pathway of beauty has an increasingly powerful role to play in opening our hearts, and those of our neighbour, to the reality of the transcendent, that ultimate horizon which we sense, and against which we play out our lives. This is the reason why we should take great care about the beauty and holiness of our public worship. We know well how a great work of art or piece of music can take us out of ourselves, and lift us beyond our daily preoccupations. Our worship must aim to do that too, if it is to be effective in fostering our relationship with the Lord.

As for goodness – I am told that nearly 100,000 volunteer hours are offered by parishioners across this diocese each year, in areas such as visiting the sick, helping the elderly, and caring for the church. Such dedication is strong evidence of missionary discipleship. No doubt there is more to be done. But this is an ancient and powerful witness and one which is still very eloquent today: an argument and an invitation beyond words, yet, I trust, containing within it a ready explanation for the hope which lies at its heart. Indeed, a lived faith is a living faith.

This evening, as we praise God for the gift of our faith in His Son and for the enduring example of so many, especially St Cuthbert Mayne, I offer some more words of Pope Francis, characteristically direct and challenging. Speaking of the need for us to be missionary disciples, he says ‘So what are we waiting for?’ (EG120). What indeed? ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!’ ‘So what are we waiting for?’ Go out to the whole world, and proclaim the Good News!

Amen.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster