

Friday Evening, Oxford

May 2011

When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I feel privileged to have been asked to preach at this service here in Oxford, a service designed specifically to help us to focus on a journey, a journey which has taken many years and one where acrimony has been at the heart of separation. It is important, therefore, that before we come together in church tomorrow, when the euphoria of the day will undoubtedly put the issues of the past well and truly to the back of our minds – and probably that is the right thing

to do - we need to reflect on the past, to think about that journey and to seek forgiveness for our part in some difficult events.

I don't know about you but I find that I still need to pinch myself to believe I am here at all; I do a kind of double-take to make sure that we are really here in Oxford to formalise a new jurisdiction that brings together a Grand Priory and a Grand Bailiwick into a sensible whole. I thank almighty God for the work of those who have steered through the implementation of the jurisdiction and have done so with great care and sensitivity under the chairmanship of the Bailiff. And yet there are others whose work we need to consider whose role has been far greater and over a much longer period.

So many people need to be recognised on this night of restoration and reconciliation, people who have risked all in the abiding belief that reunification, achieved so wonderfully in Manchester three years ago, was the only

way for our Order to survive let alone for us to continue with our charitable work. These are individuals who have endured untold abuse and have been at the receiving end of vitriolic exchanges and have suffered the intense dislike of others over many years - and yet all they wanted to do was to bring unity to our Order and see the kind of events that this weekend shall bring.

I know that many of you will share my joy in seeing Anne and David James here in church this evening. Their resolute efforts in the Joint Reunification Committee, along with Bruce Harrington, Bob Vanderwater, Joaquin Cayuela, Ron Hendriks and many, many more, and not least Don Francisco, have, without question, given the Order a future; without them we would not be here. These are those who spent endless days, thousands of hours, in committees debating the whys and wherefores of Constitutions and Bye-Laws yet trying to maintain the rights of disparate groups. And so on behalf of us all I would like to say thank you to them for their loyalty, determination and devotion

to our Order as we reach this cathartic moment for England and Wales.

The Order's past is punctuated with many such wonderful people but it is also known for just as many whose apparent sole intention was to destroy individuals, commanderies and jurisdictions alike. So many lies, so many deceitful comments, so many meetings filled with anger but Manchester 2008 drew a line in the sand and following that great occasion when Carlos was invested as the new Grand Master, many countries are now united, others, like us, about to be so and still others investigating the best way of moving forward. It is a great time to be a member of this Order and a great moment for Charles, the Earl of Shrewsbury and Waterford to be invested amongst us.

The purpose of this evening's liturgy is to offer an opportunity for all of us to move on but, as I have already indicated. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the past and on unfortunate acts of aggression which served only to

separate men and women who shared a single purpose but whose minds were swayed by more material issues.

We are an order of chivalry whose charitable objectives are very simple and that is to assist in every way we can, the sick and suffering and specifically those afflicted by leprosy; tonight there are no medals or chains of office; there are no Breast Stars sashes or cordons, no uniforms or hints of authority but simplicity, and the use of church mantles that serve to make all equal irrespective of rank. We are one.

St Matthew's gospel tells us: ... if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

We are not unusual, it seems, and the kinds of difficulties endured by us in the recent past were clearly experienced by the faithful of the first century. Arguments and disagreements are part of who we are as human beings and

to expect utopia is but a dream and unrealistic. Jesus taught that only when we are self-aware, know our faults, when we have confessed our sins and received forgiveness, can we enjoy his blessing; only when we are restored in his image can we represent his love to others and this is an opportunity to seize with both hands.

Jesus does not expect us to be perfect but he does expect us to make the effort to change and to put those things right that mar his image within us; he expects to have the courage to face the past and make restitution either directly or through penitential acts – and we must. Now is not the time to turn the other cheek but to face the music, to be responsible and honest about ourselves and one another, so that the gift we offer, namely, ourselves, will be acceptable in the sight of almighty God.

Later on in our liturgy we will all share in some wonderful prayers, based on the Beatitudes, that lead us through a penitential opportunity and towards a corporate act of

Thanksgiving. Hold nothing back; be honest; let go of all and any thoughts of jealousy or recrimination or disappointment that you or others have not been given a role you expected; let go of anything that continues to separate you from God or from each other – begin again, refreshed, renewed and in hope.

We **ARE** one! We are the people he has chosen to bring relief to the sick and to the suffering; our Order should not be at all about medals, regalia and uniforms and the preoccupation of some in asking for, or hinting about promotion. This is what we are truly about; this is a sight to behold, to see our members as we are without any decorations and yet still beautiful in the eyes of God. Do you know I am sure that despite all that Jesus did in his short life and ministry, despite all of the healing, the teaching and guiding of lives, despite all the works of love and charity that he offered that he would still willingly go to the cross for you and me, rather than receiving a Grand Cross of Merit.

And so our journey continues - there is much to do, many people to help and it begins here, tonight in this church as we say sorry for the past, seek the forgiveness of almighty God and look forward to the new day, a new jurisdiction, a new challenge and the joy of service.

Jesus said: if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

I ask that you sit quietly for a moment or two and reflect upon the past in silence and prepare yourselves to share in the prayers of penance as we reconcile ourselves to our brothers and sisters. Amen.