

UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF ST MARY, OXFORD

The Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus

‘ . . . they came not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also . . . ’ JOHN 12.9

The re-unification celebrations this weekend - of The Grand **Bailiwick** and of The Grand **Priory** - of two most noble obediences - most truly mark, in the words of Churchill, ‘the end of the beginning’.

But in the words of Francis Drake to Francis Walsingham, ‘There must be **a beginning** - of any great matter - **but the continuing unto the end** - until it be thoroughly finished - **yields the true glory**’.

So in the turning over of a new page - and the writing of new chapters - what promises might the illustrious knights and members of this newly re-united Order - make to one another?

First, I would suggest the promise . . .

TO CONTINUE KEEPING CLOSE

Keeping close is the very heart of the Lazarus tradition. There are only two men in the gospels of whom it is said that **Jesus loved them**. The first is the unnamed disciple of the Fourth Gospel. The one we might refer to as Saint John.

The other *man* whom Jesus loved - along with the man’s sisters - was **Lazarus of Bethany**. Such was the Lord’s love for Lazarus that at his grave he wept.

And just as the young and beloved Saint John leant on **the bosom** of Jesus at the Last Supper - so Lazarus the impoverished and neglected leper of St Luke’s gospel - finally leant on **the bosom** of Abraham - in the eternity of God’s love.

So we have **the twin icons** of Saint Lazarus and Saint John - both loved by the Lord - and both resting and both hiding in the intimacy of the Lord’s protection.

Within this newly constituted Order both St Lazarus and St John invite us to model all our relationships on the intimacy and security of trust that we see in the love of Christ for these two men.

And St Luke invites us to model all our relationships on the secure welcome that the suffering Lazarus ultimately found in the Abrahamic love of God.

In the Eastern Churches there is a wonderful Slavonic word ‘sobornost’ (best enunciated by such sonorous voices as those of the Bishop of London and Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia). ‘Sobornost’ denotes **a perfect organic fellowship of redeemed people united by faith**. ‘Sobornost’ concerns those of whom it is said within the fullness of faith **‘we belong to one another’**.

Perhaps ‘sobornost’ alone can stand as the watchword for the newly constituted Order.

For the Order does - after all - with its members drawn from both Orthodoxy and from the Western Catholic and Reformed traditions have **an inner vocation** to be a sign of the true and visible unity of all Christians.

But alongside the promise of an intimate and protecting love for one another - at the heart of this Christian Order of chivalry - must we not also seek - a renewal of **the intimacy that each of us has with Christ?**

Every true Christian knight and every faithful Christian lady knows that to say 'my religion is **private**' is a heresy - but to say 'my religion is **personal**' is a necessity.

The vigil and the vow of Chivalry have at their heart **the personal relationship** of each honourable and faithful member with Christ himself.

Probably the main reason why **the disciple whom Jesus loved** is never named in the Fourth Gospel is because Saint John intended each of us to see ourselves -
- as the one whom Jesus loves. We each in our own turn have a uniquely loving and mutual relationship with Christ.

Each of us in our vow of chivalry undertakes that daily tryst with Christ - both at the **private** altar of daily devotion in **prayer and scripture and intercession** - and at the public altar where with joyful frequency we partake of Christ himself - in the sacred mystery of his body and blood.

*The pasture I languish to find
Where all, who their Shepherd obey,
Are fed, on thy bosom reclined,
And screened from the heat of the day.*

*'Tis there I would always abide,
And never a moment depart,
Concealed in the cleft of thy side,
Eternally held in thy heart.* *Charles Wesley*

First, then I would suggest the promise . . .

TO CONTINUE KEEPING CLOSE
- close to each other and close to Christ

Next I would suggest the promise **TO CONTINUE HONOURING THE NAME**

Since the name **Lazarus** needs to be translated as '**the one whom God helps**' there can be no better name to honour in this noble Order of Chivalry than **Saint Lazarus himself**.

At the heart of both the Lazarus stories in the gospels is **compassion**. In the one instance we have the profound compassion **of Jesus** for the family whose beloved Lazarus has died.

In the other story Lazarus is deprived of compassion while he lives but receives the **comfort and compassion of God** in the life of heaven.

The religion of the great Orders of Chivalry is - in the words of Donald Soper - '**not pie in the sky when you die - but ham where we am**'. The programme and policy of the Order of St Lazarus is to seek out - those God longs to help - but whose needs he cannot meet without the dedicated members of the Order.

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which he looks out
in compassion on the world.
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now.*

Teresa of Avila

What we see in the arrival of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus is the Lord's **total identification** with those whose hearts are broken, his total **at oneness** with those whose lives are devastated -

- and his own **grief entering into the depths** of those whose souls have been engulfed in the separation of death.

Because the Lazarus of Saint Luke's gospel lay at the gate of the rich man and **endured a body full of sores** it has long been the tradition that he suffered from leprosy.

It was the ancient tradition of this noble Order that **only those enduring leprosy could be admitted as knights**. That tells us everything we need to know about the total identification of this Order with Saint Lazarus.

Our promise at this glorious re-unification of these two noble branches of the Order of Saint Lazarus is **to honour his name above all other names** - save that of Christ and his holy Mother.

For Lazarus being now in heaven is the Patron and Intercessor of this holy community and the icon of every sufferer from leprosy who calls out for the money and medicine and compassion that this noble Order can provide.

So I would suggest the promise

TO CONTINUE HONOURING THE NAME

My third suggestion is for this noble and re-united Order . .

TO CONTINUE CROSSING THE GULF

One of the Lazarus articles which I recently revisited had a curious author's note at the bottom of the page which said,

'See GULF'

In Hades - you will recall - where the rich and heartless Dives was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus **by his side**. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames."

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, **between you and us a great gulf has been fixed**, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

. . . . **a great gulf has been fixed**

But the last word of the gospel is not in fact about the great chasm between heaven and hell that cannot be crossed.

The last word of the gospel is about a Saviour who descended into the abode of the dead as a shepherd descends into the dark ravine to rescue the sheep and the goats that have lost their way.

The ministry of Christ **transcends the gulf** that separates the sheep from the goats, and his cross is stretched as a ladder **from the depths of hell to the gates of heaven**.

There **is** no darkness that Christ cannot penetrate - there **is** no separation that he cannot reconcile and there **is** no distance that Christ cannot bridge.

This Order of Chivalry is dedicated to the ministry of reconciliation.

Today we see that reconciliation incarnate in the coming together of these two fine traditions within the Order.

That reconciliation is borne of Christ himself. The gulf has been bridged. The chasm has been crossed. Hands now held out can never be withdrawn.

The vocation of this newly constituted union is to **cross every chasm** of need placed before it and to **bridge every gulf of suffering** that it finds.

This order ever remembers the words of St John of the Cross,

At eventide we will be examined in love.

The final words of Jesus when his eternal word had called forth Lazarus of Bethany out of the tomb was his command to the neighbours – **'Unbind him and let him go'**.

Christ turns the faces of this united order towards those in this world **imprisoned by leprosy** and **immobilised by disease** - and says - to all 'Unbind them, and let them go'

Now to the one true and eternal God - as is must justly due - be ascribed all majesty, dominion and praise, now and unto the ages of ages. **Amen**