



Homily for Ceremony of Investiture of the Order of Lazarus

27th April 2019

Cardiff Cathedral: St. David's Cathedral, Cardiff

Archbishop George Stack

Pope Francis is often criticised for his dramatic gestures and controversial meetings. In February this year, he undertook one of his most daring missions when he visited the United Arab Emirates in his ongoing quest for peace. Meeting the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Grand Mufti he courted controversy not by praying with them but by being at prayer whilst they prayed in their own way. Politics, religion and the search for peace are very dangerous things if they are taken seriously.

The Pope was following in the footsteps of his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi. Eight hundred years ago this year, whilst the Crusades were at their height, Francis despaired of killings in the name of God. He took some of his followers deep into the conflict zone and went to Egypt to meet Sultan Malik al Kamil of Egypt, the nephew of the Kurdish warrior Saladin. Like the Pope, Francis broke down other barriers also. Listen to this extract from his biography:

“Then the holy lover of complete humility went to the lepers and lived with them serving them most diligently When I was in sin, he said, it seemed extremely bitter to me to look at lepers, and the Lord himself led me among them and I practiced mercy with them”. (**First Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano**). In modern history of the Church, too, we have another hero saint in Damien of Molokai who dedicated

his life to the forgotten lepers of that Pacific island and died amongst them of leprosy in 1889.

Are we not blessed to have such examples of charity and heroic virtue to inspire our care of forgotten and hidden people? Forgotten and hidden because those who suffer are usually on the margins of society, on the periphery as Pope Francis would say. Poverty, poor sanitation, lack of education, sporadic treatment, no instant cures, an “unglamorous” disease to western eyes. All these contribute to the ignorance which surrounds the prevalence of leprosy in the so called Third World. We are being made painfully aware that in our global village there is only One World, and it is our world, and we all have a duty to care for it – not least through the delicate ecology of the human dignity of those who are sick.

Blessed, too, by having charities like the Order of St. Lazarus, the members of which have caught the vision that society is as strong as its weakest link. The vision that none are more vulnerable than those bearing an illness from which it is too easy to recoil. It is good on this occasion when we induct new members into the Order to celebrate and give thanks for the dedicated work of its members in “bearing one another’s burdens” as St. Paul puts it so well in his letter to the Galatians.

As always, we take our inspiration from the word of God as recorded in today's reading from the gospel of Luke. The story of Dives and Lazarus. So much to meditate on and you will no doubt have done since this passage is the inspiration for your work of charity. But there are two particular lines I would invite you to reflect on as you continue your work for those who lie at the gates of those who are "rich" and ignorant or neglectful of those who are "poor" or sick, or deprived or alienated for any reason whatsoever. The first sentence *"... between us and you a great gulf has been fixed to stop anyone, even if he wanted to, crossing from our side to yours and to stop anyone crossing from your side to ours"*. An apocalyptic sentence. The time for action is now. No good regretting non-action in the future. It isn't just climate change that demands attention so that irreparable damage may be avoided. The same with those who are bearing the burden of a disease which could be eradicated if there was the political, economic and social will to do so.

And then the second sentence. You will know all the evidence is there for a cure for leprosy, not least in the three-year cycle of treatments. Even health politics enter into this field of morality and justice. So, the words of the gospel speak loud and clear *"They have Moses and the Prophets to listen to. Let them hear them If they do not hear them,*

neither will they be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead". (Luke 16:29)

Let the Order of Lazarus continue to be the voice of Moses and the prophets in eradicating the disease of leprosy. Let each member, in word and action, *"speak the truth in love"* as St. Paul says today (Ephesians 4:15) in order to *"build up the body of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:12). And let the final words be those of St. Theresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion

On the world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands with which he blesses the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.