

Sermon in Honour of the Holy Cross Thursday 28th November 2024

There are perhaps few things as tedious as a cleric who takes the sacred office of preaching as an opportunity to expound on their travel experiences. And I am reluctant to do so myself. However, I've just had ten weeks away (as I'm sure almost all of you are aware), I just got back, I had a wonderful time, and I can't resist! As most of you know, the first part of my travels was a walking pilgrimage from Lucca, in Tuscany in central Italy to Rome, some three weeks and 420 plus km on foot. By happy coincidence the start of my pilgrimage in Lucca was around Holy Cross Day, 14th September. Lucca, a medieval city with a complete wall surrounding it is its most famous feature. But the chief festival or holiday for the town is Holy Cross Day, and observed with typical Italianate flair.

The reason Holy Cross Day is the chief festival for the city is that the cathedral possesses a remarkable, life-size sculpture of Christ on the cross, purportedly carved by Nicodemus of gospel fame. Now, we need not interrogate tonight the historical veracity of such claims. Nonetheless the city has possessed the image since the eighth century, itself remarkable, making it one of the earliest surviving Christian wood sculptures. The image is known as the Volto Santo: the Sacred Countenance. A picture of it is on the front cover of your service booklet. In the cathedral the image is housed in a magnificent free-standing octagonal marble chapel. When I was there the image was in the process of a major restoration project that was taking place within the cathedral itself.

On the night before Holy Cross Day, a fine service of solemn vespers was sung in the cathedral with all the canons of the cathedral attending in their fine lace rochets. In the morning, Lauds and Mass was celebrated. But on the vigil the chief celebration was a large procession through the city. The route of the procession was from one church with a fresco series depicting the legend of the Volto Santo to the cathedral square. The route was marked by every window and doorway framed by candles. There would have been tens of thousands of these little white candles. For hours before the night procession, teams of men in cherry pickers and on ladders made their way along the route lighting the candles. It makes even the most ambitious candle arrangements in our churches – including here! – look tame! By dusk the centre of the town was a magical sight.

And then the procession itself. Accompanied by the ringing of bells and various songs and hymns and chants, it took some two hours to pass. At its head, a large banner - a few metres high and taking several men to manoeuvre - depicting the Volto Santo. And then a large cross, again several metres high, made of flowers which took pride of place in the cathedral for the following day. The procession then consisted of numerous associations, confraternities, and chivalric orders in all their finery. Schools, scouts and parish groups. Banners, flags, and insignia, large silver lanterns, drummers and at least four bands. And of course, the bishop, and canons and other various clergy. There were people in historic dress and long bowmen and cross bowman! Needless to say, it was quite a night. After speeches in the cathedral square, the performance of a new composition sung by a choir formed for the occasion, in honour of the Holy Cross. Each year there is a new commission. And finally, fireworks as well.

Of course, we have our public processions and parades and celebrations. But almost exclusively, in this country at least, they are of a secular nature. Lucca of course is not unique in some regards. Many places maintain large, splendid outdoor religious processions. Perhaps what is so striking for the outsider to observe is how they are indeed religious – Christian - in nature. Bold, confident, colourful celebrations of faith. But also how they involve the whole community. At Lucca the whole town, it seemed, either turned up for the celebration or were actively involved in some way. For *this* outsider the striking note was *the atmosphere of joy*. An entire community *united in joy* around the Holy Cross of Jesus.

The brothers of our Society know well the antiphon: *We shall glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection, through him we are saved and made free*. It forms the Introit antiphon for the mass of Holy Cross Day. And it forms part of the Society Prayer that our Rule bids us to say after morning or evening prayer each day. *We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Perhaps we might say we should be *joyful* in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. We should *rejoice* in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. But I daresay that for most of us, when we consider the Cross, joy is not the first thing that comes to mind. Perhaps seriousness or sorrow. Earnestness or grief. And indeed, these are all appropriate responses to the Cross of our Lord. But perhaps rarely joy, or glory. Why joy? Precisely because in the Cross is our salvation! In the Cross is our life! In the cross we are saved and made free! And if these cannot be the source of our joy, nothing will!

Our rule further reminds the brethren that the objects of our society shall be: *to strengthen and consolidate the spiritual life of its members according to catholic belief and practice; and to maintain and extend the catholic faith and discipline, and to defend truth against error.*

Now, we all know how difficult it is to maintain this position with integrity in the face of grave opposition. Not only is the faith catholic an affront to the surrounding culture. It increasingly is an affront within the church! We know this within our own priesthood. We know this in our parishes.

One response is to take the *contra mundum* approach: to stand against everyone and everything. We can shake our fist at the world. We can bewail and bemoan the developments in the church, the departures from the faith catholic, the corruption and coverups, the overt heresies we are now almost daily exposed to and are expected to champion. And of course we must resist them, as the rule says, *to defend truth against error.* And this in service of the Lord Christ who is Truth.

But oftentimes our standing against the world (or even against the church) is as if we could save either or both. But that of course is not our job. Christ has done that job. Our job is to save souls and makes saints. To that end, fist shaking and making war won't get us very far. Grumpy defiance is rarely attractive. Joy, however, is.

The Cross stands as an invitation, my brothers, for us to exercise our priesthood in joy. It stands an invitation for us all to exercise our Christian lives in joy. It is an invitation for us to be communities of joy. Which does not remove us from the challenges of life, or the difficulties of practicing the fullness of the faith catholic. But it provides us with the wider horizon on which we can place our ultimate hope.

In the Mystery of our faith, the Cross – an instrument of torture and human depravity – is transformed into something beautiful. The Cross *is* Beautiful, because through it we *are* saved and made free. Could there be a greater witness to the truth our faith than a response of joy to the saving cross? Amen.