



Homily of S.E. Card. Vincent Nichols

Given at the Jubilee of Priests at Santa Maria Regina degli Apostoli alla Montagnola in Rome on the feast of Ss Peter and Marcellinus, 2 June 2016.

'Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David' (2 Tim 2.8).

These twelve words, one of the earliest proclamations of our faith in the divinity and humanity of Christ, form the framework of our lives and mission as priests.

St Paul then adds two other words: hardship and faithfulness, making fourteen in all. These words give shape to our reflection this evening.

Paul speaks of his own hardships: being chained up like a criminal. Today we hold in memory two other martyrs of this city, Saints Marcellinus and Peter, a priest and an exorcist who were put to death in 304 in the persecution of Diocletian. Their suffering and their faithfulness was in bearing witness to Christ, the one who in his divinity raises our humanity to its fulfilment.

Imagine this: there was a young boy here in Rome in the early part of the third century. One day he was listening to a man in their community in San Lorenzo giving testimony as to his conversion to Christianity. The man explained that he had been an executioner and he told the boy how one day in 304 he had executed two holy men, called Marcellinus and Peter. On witnessing their deaths, he had become a Christian. That boy became Pope Damasus (First) and it was he who worked hard to give these early martyrs dignified burials in what we now know as the catacombs and their associated churches. The blood of martyrs is indeed the seed of the Church.

In the last few days in England we have been listening again to a story, handed down for over eight centuries, of another martyrdom. Last Saturday a precious relic of St Thomas Becket entered Canterbury Cathedral for the first time since the martyrdom of that Archbishop of Canterbury on 29 December 1170. It was the culmination of a 'pilgrimage' of this relic, brought from Esztergom in Hungary, returning to England for the first time since the age of Thomas' death.

Now from the moment of his death, the fame of Thomas Becket and strong devotion to him spread like wildfire across Europe. He became a symbol of the resistance of the Church to powerful and unscrupulous rulers, his death being all the more dramatic because he had previously served one such ruler, actually helping him to remove resources and power from the Church in order to strengthen the position of the Crown.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Becket became a martyr who, in English literature and iconography, linked the apostles, Paul, the ancient martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter, with those of the later age of the Reformation, including of course St Thomas More. All gave witness to Christ; all bore hardships even unto death; all rejoiced in the faithfulness of Christ unto the Resurrection and the glory of heaven.

Thomas Becket also quickly became the patron saint of the clergy, not just in England but in Hungary and in many European countries. He is our inspiration. Thomas embraced his ordination as priest and bishop with a radical seriousness. So should we. He turned his back on his previous ways of life, which had been focused on the comfort of possessions, the appeal of fashion and style, the protection of power and popularity. So should we. His focus became Christ, the sole measure and

motivation of every word and action. This is to be our focus too. He made his own the words of St Paul: 'For him I have accepted the loss of everything if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him' (Phil 3.7-8).

Thomas knew when compromise was no longer an acceptable path. His fellow bishops did not. They succumbed to pressure and opinion. For Thomas this led to a dramatic decision to return to his See, from exile, knowing his life was at risk.

For us the risks are less dramatic. They creep up on us as we slowly compromise and lose our distinctive identity and with it some of the edge, the power, of the witness we are to give.

I heard a disturbing story recently. If the water in which a frog is kept is slowly increased in temperature, slowly, ever so slowly, the frog doesn't jump out but becomes so accustomed to the heat that it ends up dead, cooked by the water it is in. Today let us remember: better to be a good and faithful priest than a cooked frog!

In the stories of Marcellinus and Peter and Thomas Becket their mortal remains, their relics, play an important part. They remind us of the human reality of these saints. They remind us of the earthiness of our mission: to be among and with the realities of this world, with all its messiness and brutality. As priests we may already experience some hardship. We can expect to do so. But we should never think of these hardships as special, as something which sets us apart from our people. We should never think of ourselves as 'hard done by'. The hardships of life are not discriminating and any priest who strives always to shelter himself from that shared hardship is on the track of losing his identity. He is on the road of the cooked frog.

Like Jesus, we are sprung from the human race and share a full measure of its distress.

But we live it in the light of the Resurrection. We strive to express in our struggles and our ministry that perseverance which is motivated by the vision of our heavenly destiny. Therefore, a priest who is always complaining about his troubles, about his lack of free time, about his lack of money, about his companions, about his bishop, is a counter sign. Yes, there is hardship; but, yes there is faithfulness; yes, there is resurrection, the true source of our daily hope, joy and perseverance.

The shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral became, for four centuries, one of the great centres of European pilgrimage, until it was destroyed by another King, Henry VIII, who vowed not to make the same mistake as his predecessor, Henry II. One of the most remarkable pieces of evidence I heard last week was that the tomb of Thomas Becket became a place where, miraculously, reconciliation between enemies was often achieved.

For this grace we too pray today: that our ministry as priests will be characterised by striving for the reconciliation of conflicting parties. This, of course, can only have its source in the gracious mercy of God, a mercy which, we know, God never tires of pouring out even while we grow weary of seeking it. But during this Year of Mercy this grace is indeed being poured out on the disciples of the Lord, especially through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Today we rejoice in this hope and in this privilege of our calling.

Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David. He is our hope and our joy. He is our head and our heart. Today we rejoice in our calling to be his priests and we call upon these holy saints and martyrs to help us in our hardship and to restore us in our faithfulness.

Amen.

