Mass of Thanksgiving
to celebrate the 10th Anniversary
of
The Centre for Catholic Studies
Durham Cathedral
19 April 2018

Homily by Rev Adrian Dixon

By the banks of silv’ry Wear, ‘neath proud Dunelm’s towered shrine,
rests the body of our patron, hard by Beda, sage divine.

This line, I learnt it 50 years ago, will be unfamiliar to most people here. It was our school song but not long after we learnt it fashions changed – no-one sings it now.

The words popped into my head when I heard that Mass was to take place in this stunning, sumptuous church. The fact that this evening we journey from the bones of Bede to the resting place of Cuthbert makes the line seem so fitting.

When Bishop Seamus suggested that I preach before this dauntingly clever assembly it puzzled me; there are many smarter and better qualified than I among the priests of the diocese. I concluded that just as the Bishop may ask me to stand nearby so he may seem taller and thinner he felt I should speak to you so that you may be seen all the brighter and more intelligent. It is a great honour to preach this homily and so I beg your indulgence even if, to borrow the words of a headmaster of that old school by the Tyne, every time I open my mouth some fool speaks.

We who were raised beneath the baking sun and cloudless skies of the North-east know this place well. I have been in this Cathedral many times and it always lifts my spirit as I am sure it does yours. Durham was built as the great shrine of that saintly Anglo-Saxon Bishop and canny Norman Churchmen saw sense in a magnificent upgrade with Cuthbert safely entombed in the East-end. The sage divine arrived a little later in the West perched precipitously above the silver loop of the Wear.

There are those who can explain the architectural newness of the Cathedral on the cusp of Rib-vaulting and Gothic innovation; others, the mathematical precision with proportions so significant to medieval builders. The detail sticking in my mind is that the girth of those great drum columns alternating down the Nave is the same as their height; a comfort to those with expanding circumference and diminishing stature to realise we approach aesthetic perfection.

We owe heartfelt thanks to the Dean and Chapter of Durham for allowing us to celebrate this Mass. This is a place made holy not so much by who is buried here but by the prayer offered in its daily worship and in the yearnings of the generations who have come to this house of God. We appreciate the greatness of this act of kindness allowing the Centre for Catholic Studies to mark its tenth anniversary in this way. We are humbled by your generosity.
Riding in his chariot on a desert road a man with his own copy of the scriptures was reading. He read aloud we are told. Are we to understand this as an act of proclamation – just as we have had the scriptures proclaimed here a few moments ago? Is that the one thing needed to make it proclamation – for the scripture to be read aloud?

The Ethiopian spoke the words because that was how they read in those days. It was the custom, but it meant Philip knew the passage even as he drew near. And as he drew near he engaged with him. Philip turned this speaking aloud and the questions and discussion that ensued into a proclamation of the Good News of Jesus.

So was the reading aloud part of the proclamation? One can only say yes. The returning pilgrim read aloud in order to understand and although his intention did not encompass the story of Jesus Christ it was the intention of the Holy Spirit that this should happen.

We have a clue here about proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is never monologue. It occurs in dialogue even when, especially when there are words said aloud that are not spoken with faith. In listening and responding familiar, sometimes secular words open to new meaning. It is the conversation that shapes them into acts of witness.

This is why Theology is charged with finding a place in a secular environment if it is to fulfil its nature. It is why the Centre for Catholic Studies exists; to help Catholic Theology in this country and internationally converse with the many voices of other disciplines and viewpoints.

This engagement with the many-disciplined world of study and the wider secular concerns of society is the purpose of any Theology Department and Durham has long excelled in this. This jewel in the Department of Theology and Religion - a Centre of expertise in Catholic Theology offers a specific focus for this engagement. Would this Centre for Catholic Studies fulfil its purpose if it were based in a Catholic University or similar Catholic Institution? It would not.

Its proclamation can only be in an open forum of debate and in this market place it fulfils its purpose of being properly Catholic, addressing all; truly theological, speaking of the things of God with the highest standards of academic discipline and, most importantly, correctly missionary, listening and responding.

We could say that the Centre for Catholic Studies here in Durham finds its patron in Bede because he was the greatest theologian to have lived and worked in the North of England. There is another way of looking at our patron. He ended up not just in Durham Cathedral but specifically in Galilee.

One can only be grateful to the University for making possible this remarkable development that has grown so fruitfully during these past ten years. Those who helped the Centre come into existence; those who provide for its ongoing resourcing share a vision deserving the highest praise. These are times of diminishment and reduction in the Church and that makes this undertaking all the more admirable. The labourers who have ensured that it lives and grows have done so with skill and sensitivity, perseverance and patience, insight and intelligence.

The Ethiopian treasurer asked Philip some telling questions. How can we understand if no-one explains? Was the prophet referring to himself or someone else?
The passage that he was reading is one of sorrow and suffering. ‘Who will ever talk about his descendants?’ asked Isaiah of the one humiliated. One can’t help wonder if this African pilgrim had not had the best of times in the holy city. Did the woes of the Servant resonate in the Ethiopian’s heart?

Being a eunuch meant he was excluded from drawing close to Temple worship and perhaps he was shunned by those expert in ritual and theological purity. Had his experience sown doubt?

Here is an intriguing space in which spiritual questioning happens – the setting of alienation. It is the hurt of being kept outside, at a distance that makes the search for truth significant. Philip sees all these questions as opportunity. He will instruct, he will tell about the Servant of God, he will open the door to one who wonders about his future. That is why the Ethiopian asks his final testing question – is there any bar to his being accepted, his being baptised?

If it happened now? He’d receive a cautious invitation to go on an RCIA course. Actually the encounter highlights the bigger question for us as Christians, Catholics, a Centre concerned with Catholic Studies. Dialogue in the market place as a model for proclamation and a home for theology is to be with those who experience exclusion. We may feel we are no longer aliens but unless we engage with those who do we fail in our vocation. Philip’s response was to welcome.

It is important not to underestimate this. Welcoming the excluded and obeying the Holy Spirit to run up and greet those whose background and being are different is disturbing. The questions they ask should make us question ourselves and that is what God expects of us.

The encounter with estrangement speaks to us of ourselves. Every person has moments in life on the outside looking in, feeling cut off from others. Before we rush to hug away the loneliness we might recognise that it is at these times we are most open to the deepest movements of God. Indeed it is only through these experiences that we recognise the need to draw nearer to who seem far away.

\[Cuthbert; hard by Beda, sage divine.\]

The everyday trivia of the work I do concerns the ways in which we celebrate correctly or otherwise Mass and the Sacraments. I have to worry about those questions which other people say, ‘it’s a worry that these questions are asked’.

I remember vividly a very concerned priest, no longer with us, asking whether the candles at Mass must be placed on the altar or could they be free standing – I answered, ‘the rule says they can be free standing near the altar’. ‘That’s my point,’ he said, ‘how near do they have to be?’

Well I fell over myself in haste to consult the written authorities and one of the more sober commentaries remarked that a good English rendition of the instruction would be ‘hard by’. The years fell away as I recalled a music teacher threatening violence if we didn’t remember the school song. A rough calculation later I rang the priest; candles are not allowed to be more than 150 yards from the altar.
The Centre for Catholic Studies has come a long way these ten years. Congratulations on the wonderful achievement of your efforts. Your task continues and it is to go much further, to make great distances no more than a step, hard by Beda, sage divine.