

Three Laurences

On St Laurence Day I want us to learn some lessons, not just from our Patron Saint, but from two other Laurences as well. So this is a tale of three Laurences.

We must start with our Patron. Forgive me, those of you who know the story so well – but there will hopefully always be people who are new to it. Laurence was a Deacon – one of the seven deacons of the Roman church at the time of the persecution of the church under the Emperor Valerian, in the year 258. The Pope, Sixtus II had just been martyred, and the prefect of Rome arrived at the church and ask Laurence to bring out the church's treasures. Instead of bringing out the gold and silver that was expected, he produced the poor, the aged and the sick of the Christian community, and said that they were the church's treasures. For this is he was martyred – traditionally the story is that he was roasted on a gridiron, but most scholars now think he was probably beheaded, as Sixtus had been.

The thing I would ask you to take from this Laurence is his sense of values. We can all usefully ask ourselves what is most valuable to us. What might we describe as priceless? At the Coronation, the Bible was given to the Queen with the words that it is the most valuable thing the earth affords. The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament talks in several places of Wisdom being more precious than rubies and gold – and in that book Wisdom is used as a way of talking about God. Specifically St Laurence challenges us to think about we value people. Sometimes you hear it said that someone is a 'valuable person to know' – and that usually means that they will be of benefit to you – someone from you can gain something. But the people Laurence brought were precisely the people who in worldly terms were 'no use'. In economic terms they contributed nothing. They were the benefit-seekers, not givers. They couldn't do much. But they were the treasures. The fit and fat Christians of Rome had to see them as equal brothers and sisters. As Isaiah said – they are people who were 'precious in my sight'. To use St Paul's image, they represented well the clay jars in which the treasure of God's love has been placed. Laurence lived at a time of persecution, as we do, but fortunately not in our country. We tend to close our eyes to the amount of persecution our brothers and sisters are suffering today. On Palm Sunday this year at least 45 people were killed in

bombings at two Egyptian churches. But in a list of places where Christians are most at risk of persecution, Egypt lies 21st – way down the list. One research organisation computed that in the last twenty years, the average number of Christian martyrs was 90,000 a year. Was St Laurence foolhardy in bringing out the sick and poor? He could have been more careful. But the way he valued people made it impossible to do otherwise. If we have even the slightest sense of not valuing people – and we catch ourselves out when we think things like ‘He or she’s only a...’ whatever. They are only people for whom Christ died. Those 90,000 martyrs a year are only our brothers and sisters. Let us learn from St Laurence to check our valuations.

But let me move on in time to the middle of the c.17th. A man who was born in about 1611, with the name Nicholas Herman entered a new monastery in Paris as a lay brother – like Peter Cook’s miner who didn’t have the Latin to become a judge, he didn’t have the Latin to train as a monk. He took the name Laurence of the Resurrection. Brother Laurence, as he has become known, spent the rest of his life there, at first working in the kitchen, and later repairing sandals. But this unlettered person – ‘only a kitchen assistant’ became a spiritual guide to many, to the extent that even a Cardinal of the day wanted to discover more about him. We know very little of what he said for people to value him so highly. There are about 16 letters and a little document which has become known as ‘The Practice of the Presence of God’ – it is only about nine pages long – and with the letters his entire output can be found on about 19 pages. You can easily find them on the Internet. What he did was to discover that to be close to God you didn’t need systems and arcane religious practices. You just needed to be aware of God being with you at all times. Let me read you a little of what he wrote:

‘Men invent means and methods of coming at God’s love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God’s presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?’

Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do. . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.’

He was the first to admit that all this is easier said than done – but he has helped countless other Christians in their spiritual journey by what he taught. John Wesley included his writings in the library he published for his converts. But let me apply something of his wisdom to our current situations. Christians have been at the forefront of providing practical – sometimes very small practical – help for those involved in the Grenfell Tower disaster. Christians all over the country are at the forefront of those providing material help for those living in poverty through the work of food banks.

We can't be ostriches and pretend these horrors don't exist. Laurence wrote these words about sickness, but it applies perfectly well to these other situations. We have to live with the horrors and offer them to God. He wrote:

'I do not pray that you will be delivered from your pains, but I do pray sincerely that God will give you strength and patience to bear them as long as he pleases. The world, of course, cannot understand this. They see no good at all in sickness and pain....we can go so far as to say that God is sometimes nearer to us in sickness than in health. So be satisfied with your condition even if it is one of sickness and distress. Take courage. Offer your pain to God. Pray for strength to endure; adore him even in your infirmities!'

Let us learn from Brother Laurence simple trust in the nearness and love of God whatever our circumstances.

Our last Laurence is even nearer to our times. In January 17th 1912, five people from Captain Scott's expedition reached South Pole. On the way back, one of them - Captain Laurence Oates - became badly frostbitten, and was slowing up the speed of the journey. On March 16th he said to his companions in their tent, with a blizzard blowing outside 'I am just going outside, and may be some time.' His friends knew that he was deliberately going out into the snow - he was walking to his death. He had decided that if they were going to have any chance of surviving, he must not hold them up. He gave his life so they could live. That is so close to the heart of what we are doing here this evening. We come to receive Christ, who on a much greater scale did as Laurence Oates did: he gave up his life so that all of us could have eternal life. The word which covers all that is 'sacrifice'. Giving anything up is hard. Giving anything up for other people's sake is harder still. Let's take a comparatively trivial example. I have never smoked – being brought up in a pub put me off very successfully - but it is pretty clear to me that for many people giving up the evil weed is very hard. When the ban on smoking in

public places came in, the reaction from some people was depressing – they don't see why they should sacrifice what they enjoy because it might adversely affect others. If you have a mind-set like that, which is totally centred on what you want for yourself, the action of someone like Laurence Oates is beyond belief. It maybe also explains why what Jesus did is difficult for them to grasp as well. Let's learn from Laurence Oates to follow Jesus in putting others first.

That's the third of our lessons from our Laurences – let me remind you of the other two – that we learn from our Patron Saint to value people properly, and from Brother Laurence to find simple trust in the nearness and love of God. Three great men and three great lessons. May we take them to heart as we celebrate this St Laurence Day.