

Deacon, Saint and Martyr

For fifteen years I was Vicar of a church dedicated to St Lawrence, then retired to Ludlow and worshipped at St Laurence. Now in St Ives, in a church dedicated to All Saints, and which has two statues of saints on each pillar, the pew where Pippa and I usually sit if I am not doing something at the front, has a statue of – yes you guessed it – St Laurence, So he has been part of my life for a long time. You probably know all about St Laurence, but forgive me if I just say who he was for the sake of anyone who is a newcomer to his world. He lived in the early 3rd century in Rome, where he was one of the seven deacons of the Christian Church in Rome, under Pope Sixtus II - I will say something about what a deacon was and is later. Sadly, the Emperor Valerian was persecuting Christians, and in 258, the Pope, and six of the deacons were arrested and executed. St Laurence followed four days later, on August 10th 258. The story goes that he was asked to bring out the church's treasures. Instead of the gold and silver that they expected, Laurence assembled the poor and the sick and presented them to the prefect, and said - 'Here are our treasures'. The story that he was executed by being roasted on a gridiron are now largely discounted by the scholars, for which we can be grateful - but that remains his symbol in heraldry. His heroism and courage have been venerated from the very beginning.

So that is Laurence - a man from a long long time ago. What has he to say to us on August 9th 2026? Let me simply take three of things that can be said about him, and apply it to us in our situation.

First of all he was a **Deacon**. As far as we can see, the deacon in the church at that time had three aspects of his work. He helped the priest at the altar, he was the administrator, and had a particular concern for the poor and sick. It is the last one that I want to concentrate on. Jesus talked about himself as being 'among you as one who serves'. So the deacon represented that aspect of Christ to the community. Back in Lawrence's day - and indeed right up to our own century - the task of the church in caring for the poor and needy was very important indeed. Before the welfare state, the main source of community care came through the church. Sometimes, that gets to be a bit silly. In Yorkshire I was Trustee of a Charity which had to distribute bread to the poor of an ancient parish (now three modern parishes) three times a year. The income we had to do that, to provide bread for the poor within a population of about 30,000, was roughly £7.00 a year! Times change. But in some way or other, the responsibility remains to be the servants of the poor and needy. If we are followers of Christ, we are followers of one who served others. And the word itself is important. The Bible talks about us being slaves of Christ, and servants of each other. The difference is clear enough isn't it? A slave has no choice - he doesn't wait at table because he chooses to do so - he *has* to do it. And so the argument is that if we know how much God has loved us in Christ, we have no choice but to be his slaves. But being a servant of each other is something which we have to take on voluntarily. We love each other because we choose to live our lives like that.

That is a tremendous statement about lifestyle to set before any of us who have been baptised. We are to live as servants of those in need, servants of each other. Our New Testament reading had lots to say about the importance of being a cheerful giver, and the need to sow bountifully. So following the example of Laurence the Deacon should challenge us about the way we use our money, and our property. Do we teach our children, by word and example, how to be generous, how to give away not only their cash, but their time and energy for the sake of others? We are baptised into Christ, the servant King

Then secondly Laurence was a **Saint**. Yes, of course he is one of those very special people that have been recognised by the church as being especially good examples of Christian discipleship. But we need to go behind that title almost as a honour to its real meaning, which we find throughout the New Testament.

There *all* God's people are called saints. The letters of Paul are sometimes addressed to 'the saints in...wherever'. He wasn't writing just to the very holiest of them all, but to everyone. I used to have a colleague years ago who was prone to starting the service by saying 'Good morning God's holy people' - in other words 'God's saints', because that is what it means. This isn't the time or place for investigating such a huge idea as 'holiness' But let me simply remind you that the word 'holy' and the word 'whole' are very close. What we would want for ourselves, is that we get our act together, that, to adapt Matthew Arnold's poem we might 'see life steadily and see it whole'. And that means including God in the picture - in fact not just including, but allowing God his proper place in giving to all of life its proper perspective. Saints bring light and peace and joy and goodness to the world around them. They make life more wholesome, more complete, more as it should be. And that is the task of every Christian. We express that in baptism by the giving of a candle. We are the light-bringers. The candle is not a large one - but then until very recently - probably under some dictat from Brussels - it was customary to express the brightness of even the most powerful searchlight as being so many 'candlepower'. God's light is spread by candle-power as well - the candles which are you and me, for better or worse the saints of our generation. We may not feel too comfortable being called saints, but saints we are, and we need to work at living up to it.

Then thirdly, Laurence was a **martyr**. That word has come to mean someone who is killed for his faith - and whatever the historical truth of the means of his death, there is no doubt that Laurence died because he was a Christian. Is that what we are called to be as well? It would be a foolhardy person who would answer yes - none of could know whether we would have the courage of the martyrs. But we do need to remember that martyrs are not just people of the past - there are still people dying because they call themselves Christians today. Our comfortable Christianity is not the whole story by any means. But even if we are not called to such a trial of faith, we are nonetheless called to follow Laurence in being martyrs in its literal meaning - because strictly speaking it means 'a witness'. And we all know what that involves. A witness in court is someone who has seen something and is prepared to stand up and tell the truth about it. And unless people tell what they have seen, then justice may not be done, and the truth will not be known. Whoever we are, and wherever we may be, we have constant opportunities to tell the truth

we have discovered about God. We may on occasions tell it in words, because people ask us, or the opportunity arises to explain something about what we know of God's love. Rather more often we are witnesses by the way we live - people are always watching each other, and reacting to each other. We admire someone, or dislike them. We think them good or not good. We can't avoid that. But it precisely because that is a normal part of life that Christian witness is rooted in living Christian lives twenty-four hours a day. And nowhere is that more apparent than within the family. Maybe some of you know that story of the Brothers Grimm, about the little boy who lived with parents and grandfather, who was getting very old and doddering. Because he often spilt his food, the parents made the old man eat separately from them. When he became so weak that he dropped his plate, they made him eat from a wooden bowl. The one day they found their little boy whittling at a piece of wood, and asked him what he was doing. 'I'm making a wooden bowl so that I can look after you when you are old' he said. Children are not the only ones who learn our real values by how we live. Our calling is to witness, to be the everyday martyrs, so that people see what God has done for us.

Are we being the deacon, the saint, the martyr? The answer to that is between us and God. But it is a real question, and one that needs answering. And good answers will mean that this community will go from strength to strength, and live up to the values of its patron whom we recall and honour today.