

Homily for Mass with The Passage

Westminster Cathedral

3 December 2010

At this Mass this evening, we thank God for the work of The Passage and we seek our own renewal, in dedication and motivation, for its work.

There is a lovely account of that work, of all the good done by The Passage, in the inside cover of our Mass booklets. It tells the story of the Passage Day Centre, from the first opening of its doors in 1980 to its present day achievements. It explains how this initiative is deeply rooted in the tradition, the charism and the work of the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent De Paul who first came to this part of London, to work among the poor, in the 1860's.

So here is a first point of inspiration: the figure of St Vincent – my patron saint! He was a man who discovered, somewhat to his own surprise, that the essence of the vocation he had been given was not to be among rich benefactors, as he had assumed, but among the poor and the most vulnerable. He saw that in serving them he was serving Christ himself. It was an identification that shaped his life, his writings and the inspiration that he passed on to the Congregations that he founded. And that is the inspiration and motivation we seek to renew in ourselves, in The Passage, today.

At the present time there is much talk about the need to renew in our society a culture of social responsibility. It comes at the same time as a serious shortage of public funding for so many social outreach programmes as we know that the public finances are in dire straights. I believe we should not give way to cynicism and dismiss this talk of renewed social responsibility. Nor should we hesitate to put forward our own understanding of the kind of motivation needed to foster and nurture such a culture. Here the Christian faith has so much to offer. If social responsibility is indeed to become a hall-mark of our society then we have to be clear that motives of self-interest will not be sufficient, nor will market forces sustain that effort. We have to accept that something of the gratuity, of the self-gift, of the self-sacrifice that lies at the heart of the Christian life is essential.

So The Passage, with all its supporters and staff, are right to be here and to seek to draw this inspiration from the well-spring of Christ himself.

The work of the Spirit of God, offered to us in Christ Jesus, is well described in the first reading: the deaf will hear; the eyes of the blind will see; the lowly will rejoice; the poorest will exult 'for tyrants shall be no more and scoffers vanish and all be destroyed who are disposed to do evil' not least those who gossip to incriminate others and those who seek to cheat the arbitrator.

This is a strong programme and has to be read in the context of the work of faith and not simply social reform. For, in honesty, we recognise ourselves as being among those in need of conversion, of a change of heart and of life. So we welcome with relief the words of the Gospel when those two blind men speak up for us all, saying, 'Take pity on us, Son of David.'

Here is the dynamic of the work of faith: we recognise our own needs; we turn to God and find there a compassionate forgiveness; we are then enabled to offer to others the same compassion and forgiveness that we have received, for now we see their need as a reflection of our own more hidden needs. This is the dynamic of true social responsibility. This is what rescues it from the dangers of paternalism. This is what roots it in the deepest motives of mutual respect and true care. This is the dynamic that fired the soul of St Vincent de Paul and it can do the same for us today.

We celebrate this Mass on the feast day of another well-known saint: St Francis Xavier. His calling was one of opening new ways of access to the Gospel. He did so in his great mission in India and Asia. We can seek to imitate him among those who in their material poverty know their need and who, at the same time, appreciate their friends and those who serve them.

May Francis Xavier and Vincent de Paul pray for us today, that our work may, like theirs, bring glory to God and good to our society. Amen

+ Vincent Nichols
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