

**Mass on the Feast of St Edward the Confessor,
in the presence of the relics of St Therese.**

Tuesday 13 October

In the National Gallery, there is a painting which represents the highest achievements of English Mediaeval art. It is the Wilton Diptych and it stands as a reminder of a time when culture and life in this country were profoundly Catholic. But that, along with much of the art of that time, has long gone although we treasure these works which still inspire us today.

In this famous altar piece we can see St Edward the Confessor, whose feast we keep today. He was King from 1042 to 1066, a time a change and upheaval in this land. For 300 years he was the official Patron Saint of England.

In the painting he is portrayed holding a precious ring which, legend tells us, he had given to a beggar in a characteristic act of generosity. It was miraculously returned to him and became the symbol of his holiness.

Edward was no pious puppet manipulated by ruthless barons. As King he had to steer a path between opposing forces and serve the unity of his country, even as it was breaking down. The foundations of his life were prayer and practical kindness, to the extent that he was quickly recognised by the Church as a true Confessor of the faith.

In his famous sermon on St Edward, Mgr Ronnie Knox spoke of him as the builder of Westminster Abbey, describing it as a symbol of the King's life which was 'built from little acts of kindness of sacrifices of self' just as 'stone by stone and arch by arch rose the Abbey Church of Westminster.'

Today his relics lie so nearby, in Westminster Abbey, where once they attracted great crowds, just as today, in this Cathedral, do the relics of St Therese of Lisieux. Two great saints, one a King, the other a young Carmelite nun, separated by 850 years, yet bearing the same testimony: that God is close to us, that Jesus is pure love and that we are invited to be close to him. They both teach us how to respond to that invitation, through daily actions done out of love, for such actions 'are the ones that charm his heart'.

Together these saints bear a great witness in our country today. They teach us about the faithfulness of God, who longs to embrace each one of us in our strengths and especially in our weaknesses. They show us the importance of the things of the spirit in our self-understanding, witnessing together to the essential spiritual character of human living, reminding us that if we pursue our hopes and dreams without a profound openness to God, they will remain unfulfilled. And, for King Edward, as for St Therese, this openness to God is expressed in the daily practice of prayer.

We thank God for the gift of the presence of these precious relics here today. They help us to be close to Therese so that she can teach us her way of prayer. She calls us to a deeper closeness to the Lord. From her we learn about intimacy with Jesus, holding him as our first love and as our best lover.

She wrote: 'For me prayer is an outburst of the heart, a simple gaze directed towards heaven, a cry of gratitude and love in trial as well as in joy. It is something wonderful and supernatural that expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.'

These are words we can all understand: clear, direct, heartfelt and heart-filling. These are words we too can put into practice.

Again she teaches us in words spoken towards the end of her life: 'I'm praying, I'm saying nothing to him, I'm just loving him.'

The astonishing directness and simplicity of these words should not mislead us. Therese may well have been, in her childhood, a 'little princess' but she grew to be a tough and formidable young woman.

Please remember she lived in an age of the spirit of Jansenism, which over-emphasised the strictness of God's judgement and the difficulties of getting to heaven. This prevented many people from ever seeing God as a loving Father. Yet Therese had the strength and the grace to develop a radically different way of viewing God: as our Father who desires nothing more than to pour out the depths of his love on each one of us, and who did so in Jesus.

Today this strict view of God has not entirely disappeared from our hearts. We also face another obstacle to the intimacy with God for which we long. Today God has become a distant reality who touches our lives, if at all, only to interfere with our personal freedom, the most jealously guarded treasure of the individual today.

St Therese shows us that only in humility and with a boundless trust in God can we overcome this sense of distance. Humility and trust directly oppose our pride and our self-sufficiency. This is the key to her famous 'Little Way of Spiritual Childhood.' Every day is an opportunity to follow this little way. Every action, when it is done with humility and love, becomes a step drawing us nearer to the Lord. And such actions are supported and inspired by prayer.

She insists that this way of prayer and intimacy is not difficult. She says: 'I have not the courage to look through books for beautiful prayers...I do as a child who has not learned to read, I just tell our Lord all that I want and He understands.'

Yet there were books she constantly looked at: the books of the Bible. She said: 'In my helplessness, Holy Scripture comes to my aid: in the Bible I discover a solid and very pure nourishment. But it is especially the Gospels which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings.'

In this too we can follow her way for, in our day, the Gospels texts can always be in our hands, and we can ponder them together, repeat their phrases in our hearts, as freely as we wish. We do well to do so.

But as you all know, when Therese speaks of her helplessness she knows exactly what she is speaking about. She suffered: loneliness, heart-breaking bereavement, long debilitating illness, a slow painful death. She has been in the darkest of places. No

wonder the soldiers in the trenches of the First World War carried her picture to comfort and strengthen them. No wonder, throughout this pilgrimage of her relics, people have come to her with their burdens and tragedies, not looking for any miracle other than the strength to bear their share of the cross with a love and perseverance like hers. What we learn from her is that it is precisely when we are torn open in distress and pain that the love of God can fill us and transform our lives.

Her unique experience of the Lord's unwavering, accepting love was given to her precisely at the moments of her extreme helplessness. This is her lesson for us: that the Lord has this same unwavering love for each of us, no matter the tattered state of our lives or brokenness of our hearts.

This is how her holiness can be described: she could gaze on God with childlike loving, not averting her eyes, not fleeing as we do into the theoretical, the sentimental or the pious, but holding still before God, knowing that the gaze of the Father always brings us love, not pain.

It has been said of Therese that she had the fragility of a child but the courage of a warrior. In her company we can acknowledge our own fragility. And we can ask for a share of her courage: a courage that stops us from hiding from our failures, a courage that enables us to stand before the Lord when our eyes are full of tears, a courage to bear our hearts and souls to Him for he alone will accept, embrace and delight us.

Listen, just once more to her words, as she repeats her message about how we are to grow in intimacy with the Lord. This is the lesson we are to learn:

'Yes, my Beloved, this is how my life will be consumed...I have no other means of proving my love than strewing flowers (before you), that is to say not to let one little sacrifice escape, not one look, not one word, profiting by all the smallest things and doing them through love.'

Only step by step is a great Abbey Church built. Only step by step can we open ourselves daily to the love of God that he may build his goodness into us and that we may live in intimacy with Him.

We thank God for this time of tutoring. May we learn our lessons well, and may the prayers of St Edward our Confessor and St Therese our much loved Doctor of the Church, help us always. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols