

CHILEAN MINERS

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL

12 NOVEMBER 2010.

Not long ago, on 13 October the world witnessed the remarkable sight of men, trapped underground for 69 days, coming safely to the surface and out into the desert sunshine. Today we gather to thank God for their safety and for the intense effort of so many in rescuing them.

These events have shown Chileans to be people who can work together in the protection of human life. In this they have given a great example to other nations.

During those long days, what the world could not really see was the intense struggle of 33 men to stay together, in heart and mind, in the most terrible of circumstances. More especially we have only a little understanding of the horror and tension of the first seven days when hope of rescue must have all but gone. Yet, through great effort, the men stayed together, through conflict and profound emotions, to reach that moment when contact was made with their colleagues on the surface.

We know that this happened because there was genuine leadership exercised. We know that one man, Luis Urzua, seems to have had a role that was crucial, helping to manage the consumption of the little food and water they had and imposing routines that enabled the men to survive.

We also know that there is a deep sense of solidarity among miners, men who risk their lives for the precious energy and metals lying under the ground, so as to provide for their families and contribute to the well-being of their society.

Here was a group of men, colleagues, working together for the value of life and, marvellously, clinging on to hope when all must have seemed lost.

Then, when that remarkable message reached the surface, we saw a nation act, with no effort spared, to rescue them. Perhaps this genuine corporate effort is well symbolised in the person of the Chilean President himself, Signor Sebastian Pinera. He seems to have taken on himself the cause of rescuing these miners. If the rescue had failed, he would have failed. Not every politician will risk a reputation in that way.

Chile showed itself to be a nation willing to work together, yet also willing to seek the best technical advice from all over the world. This was a genuinely corporate effort and during it the San José Mine near Copiapó, that tiny place in the desert, became the centre of world attention. The families of the miners, who gathered there in great love and solidarity, came under intense scrutiny – which is truly uncomfortable. But the sense that the whole nation was behind them must have been a great encouragement to them all.

But then there was a third factor which helped these men, and this nation, to work together so remarkably. It is more difficult to see, in some ways impossible to see, yet

it was evident to the whole work. As one of the miners said, ‘There were not 33 of us in the mine. There were 34, for the Lord was with us.’ (No somos treintatres, somos treintacuatro. Dios estuvo con nosotros’)

As many of the miners emerged from the cage that brought them to the surface, they knelt in prayer. The nation went to Mass in thanksgiving. We are here this afternoon to thank God for the graces, the strength, the endurance he gave to all in this crisis – strength, grace and endurance that flows to us from the cross, the suffering of Jesus himself.

In these remarkable days of the crisis and the rescue, Chile showed its soul to the world: a soul of noble courage and of steadfast Christian faith. In this, Chile has witnessed to the world. For this we are all very grateful.

What can we learn from this marvellous narrative of courage and grace?

As a nation we here in Britain are facing our own problems, as are many other countries. Our problems are of our own making: many years of spending what we had not earned and of taking risks with what was not our own. Now we have to learn to work together in these difficulties, moving beyond the lessons of recent decades which insisted that we do best by putting self-interest first. Now we must embrace instead a genuine commitment to the good of others.

In Britain we have to learn this lesson, first of all, in our neighbourhood, along with those with whom we share life most immediately: in our homes, our streets, our places of work and of recreation. Our streets will not become truly safe until everyone makes that their business. Our way of life will not become peaceful until everyone puts self-indulgent anger aside, in their way of speech and behaviour. Our elderly and vulnerable will not be safe until everyone has eyes and hands open to their needs and hearts willing to respond to their needs and not ‘leave it to someone else’. We, in our turn, have to learn to work together to protect human life – something we do indeed achieve in the face of dramatic adversity, but not consistently as our shared way of life.

And in our country we have to learn to see the presence of God in all our endeavours, just as you, the people of Chile, have demonstrated to us. We, like you, can learn that in the love of God is the source of true courage and selflessness. We are invited to see, once again, that faith in God is not a problem that our society has to put away, but the ultimate source of true human flourishing, of genuine commitment to the bond of common unity between us. We cannot afford to live any more as if God does not exist.

When we read St Paul speaking of there being ‘a new creation’, and that we are its ambassadors, we do well to think of those miners emerging from the darkness of the earth into a new life. That is a parable for us all, and an encouragement that day by day we can help one another out of the darkness that so often touches our spirit into a new light that comes from the Lord.

When we read St Luke’s account of Mary, ‘setting out as quickly as she could’ to greet Elizabeth and tell her all the news, we can understand why the world’s media

dashed to the San José Mine in the Atacama Desert and why the story of this rescue flashed around the world. We can also take fresh resolve to share with others the story of our faith, and of the joy and consolation we constantly find in our relationship with the Lord. When we speak simply and joyfully of this love we touch a cord, a deep need, in the hearts of others and they, too, sense the same invitation of faith in which we rejoice.

Today, at this lovely time of prayer, we echo the words of Isaiah:
‘Yo quiero felicitar a Yave por sus favours y cantar sus alabanzas por todo loque ha hecho por nosotros!’

We sing forever of your love, O Lord, for you have worked wonders. Your right hand and your holy arm have brought us salvation.

May the Lord continue to bless us all, as we strive to work together, under His grace and guidance, observing his commandments and loving each other in His Name.
Amen.

+ Vincent Nichols