

## **Diocesan Synod – Saturday, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

### **Presidential Address**

The popular image of St Francis of Assisi is that of a gentle lover of nature; a man who preached to the birds, tamed an aggressive wolf, and even picked up worms from the path so that they wouldn't be trod upon. The love of Francis for every part of the creator's handiwork lies at the heart of his spirituality. It's one of the reasons why he continues to inspire me and many others, who make vows and promises within the Franciscan Orders, 800 years after he walked this Earth. Yet an equally important, if less immediately attractive, aspect of Francis's Way is his deep devotion to the suffering Christ on the cross. As we prepare to enter the season of Passiontide, heading solemnly towards Holy Week, I believe this medieval saint has something profound to teach us.

Late in his life, Francis prays one of the most challenging prayers I have ever come across. He asks that he might feel in his own body, as much as he can bear, the suffering of Jesus on the cross. If it had ended there, the prayer might be construed as belonging within the family of monastic masochism practised in the flagellant movements of his era. But Francis goes on. His desire to share in the suffering of his Lord is entirely in order that, thereby, he may experience in his body as much as he can bear of the love for which Christ willingly went to the cross. It's that entering into the divine love of God for the world which is the heart of his prayer. Love is what matters, suffering is the price that it willingly pays. I don't pretend to have anything approaching the spiritual depth of the saint whose example I attempt to follow. But, when I gaze at the figure of the crucified, I seek to look through and beyond the agony, and to encounter the love that saves the world.

Debased theologies of suffering abound as much today as they did in Francis's world. Those on the receiving end of suffering are told to accept their lot rather than to protest against it. God has appointed them to their station in life. As Mrs Alexander famously put it in her hymn, "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate". If your appointed lot involves suffering, like that of Lazarus, then just remember that your eternal reward awaits, and stop complaining. We rightly extol those who have followed the example of Jesus himself, those for whom this particular denial of self has proved the gateway to a greater fullness of life. But, like those called to a lifetime of holy celibacy, they are the honourable exceptions, not the rule. All too often suffering debases the sufferer just as it degrades those responsible for it. Too many tales abound of those who, having had to suffer great damage in early life, have gone on in their adult years to inflict similar damage on others. In wonderful and rare circumstances suffering can indeed lead to spiritual enrichment, but as a bishop I have had the sickening experience of hearing how young and vulnerable people have been groomed for serious, criminal abuse by being told that it was a form of suffering that would bring spiritual blessings in its train. There is no place for such distortions of Christian Faith in our teaching or proactive. And yet too often the Church has denied such perversions take place in its name, minimised the sufferings of the victims, or brushed concerns under the carpet because it's good reputation mattered more. We need to repent of our tolerance or indifference towards such suffering.

Alongside this justification of the acceptance of individual suffering, the same corruptions of theology take place at a more generic level. Often they are associated with the maintenance of regressive imbalances of power. Entire classes or nations are told to see their oppression as ordained by God, to be accepted with grace. Most notoriously, it was there in the theology used by many Christians to sustain the South African apartheid regime. Far closer to home, next year in Manchester we shall be commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the Peterloo massacre. This was the occasion when, impoverished in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the people of this area came together in peaceful protest, only to be mown down by the armed militia. It was one of the founding moments in the life of the city, an occasion when the suffering inflicted on the people led to the growth of a solidarity that has continued to inspire and characterise Manchester people to this very day. The tragedy for me is that the leadership of St Peter's church, just outside whose walls the shots were fired at the crowd, did not take the side of the people. Our commemorations next year will need to include a decent portion of penitence, here too.

As I look to the cross in the approach of Passiontide, I am more and more convinced that any understanding, religious or otherwise, of suffering which does not have the overwhelming love of God, as shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, at its heart, runs the risk of offering camouflage for the exploitation of the weak by the ruthless, and the vulnerable by the abuser. Yet Francis offers a better way. He has met in the face of his Lord on the cross, an invincible and overpowering love that no amount of suffering can sunder. Far from seducing him into stoicism, it fills him with compassion for the pains of others. He clothes the naked and embraces the leper. He even undertakes a personal peace mission, in the hope he might help bring an earlier end to the crusades. I was never comfortable with the film *The Passion of the Christ*, despite its popularity with many Christians, because it seemed to dwell too much on the surface of the Lord's sufferings, and to fail to sufficiently convey the love that lies at the centre of his crucifixion.

So my request to you to morning, as well all prepare for the holy season ahead, is threefold: that we might each of us find space over this next few days to reflect on and repent of the times when we have failed to address the suffering of others; that we will seek God's grace that we might respond in a better and more healthy way to our own suffering; and that the me as to both of these will be that we hold before us the image of the crucified.

And so may our devotions this Passiontide be grounded in love, pursued in love and graced by love, that like Francis, we may be formed more deeply in the image of Christ.