

## **Homily at Portsmouth Cathedral 16 September 2009**

'She is my visible Jesus.' This is how Thérèse once described her elder sister Pauline. What an astonishing tribute to pay to anyone! To thank them for making Jesus real, someone we can touch and feel. For being someone in whom the Lord clearly so lives so as to give our Saviour skin and bone, making him flesh, up front and physical. And isn't this exactly what Thérèse does and why she has come to our shores? Isn't this exactly who she is and how we are experiencing her here and now? She is our visible Jesus. And as she invites us to draw close and to touch she wants us, first and foremost, to be in touch with Him. And thereby with our own true dignity, and what this frail flesh and blood of ours is meant to be - an ambassador of Him, a tabernacle of him - as Thérèse was, and continues to be.

And wasn't that exactly what those disciples in the gospel (Luke 10.17-24) had been sent out to be? Jesus had sent them out 'ahead of him' to do all the things he himself has been doing, to preach, to heal, to encourage and console, to make people feel the Father's kingdom at their fingertips. In other words to make Jesus visible, tangible, real. And in the gospel they come back rejoicing, amazed that all this had happened and that such authority that had been given to them. And Jesus, unable to contain his gratitude, bursts with wonder at what God is up to: 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children.'

Think of this prayer as a grace after mission, like a grace after meals. He is thanking his Father for all that had happened, for the wonders that had been worked, for the hearts that had been converted, for the lives that had been transformed. And he is praising God even in spite of all the failures too and the message that had also undoubtedly fallen on deaf ears. Certainly Thérèse teaches us to give thanks with the Lord like this, 'in the midst of trial as we as joy,' as we do in this Mass, always and everywhere. I really hope we will hear that gospel again, in a month's time, at the end of this visitation of St Thérèse's relics to our country. Then, like with those disciples, please God there will be much rejoicing at the graces that have been experienced, much counting of blessings that have been bestowed.

But Thérèse also teaches us to give thanks up front. To anticipate what God will give, as we do at grace before meals. And so I want to suggest that we hear that gospel this evening as a 'grace before mission'. Because today Thérèse comes on mission to our country. Shortly before she died he put down on a precious piece of paper, that was subsequently incorporated into her autobiography, what she called 'my dream.' She wrote, 'I would like to travel the earth, preaching your name...I would like to proclaim the Gospel at the same time on all five continents and to the furthest isles. I would be a missionary not just for a few years but right up to the end of time.'

Like those disciples in the gospel, Jesus has sent Thérèse to us, ahead of him. Not to the furthest isles but the nearest, indeed only 150 miles across the sea! Incidentally, among her school books, some of which have survived, there is one in which at the age of 12 she drew a map of the British Isles.

Amazingly, in the dozen or so places she marked on that map is Portsmouth. In fact, remarkably, many of the venues that will be hosting her relics, like Liverpool, London, Bristol, Birmingham and York, are highlighted on that map. How fitting that those very places are the pulpits, as it were, in which she will be preaching during the coming days!

And what is it that Thérèse preaches? That the secrets of the Kingdom are revealed to little children. Just like her. In her autobiography quoting the gospel we have heard she writes: 'He, who cried out in his mortal life 'I bless you Father, that you have hidden these things from the learned and the clever and revealed them to little children' willed to have his mercy shine out in me...Ah! had the learned who spent their life in study come to me, undoubtedly they would have been astonished to see a child of 14 understand perfection's secrets, secrets all their knowledge cannot reveal because to possess them one has to be poor in spirit.'

What are some of these secrets? One of them is weakness. The kingdom is open to those who, like little children, have weakness on their side. As Thérèse once put it, 'the weaker we are, the more well-suited we are.' This is one of the richest seams in her spirituality and most arresting themes of her Little Way. It's what we want to hear, because our weakness is the one thing from which we cannot escape. Here in the presence of her remains we are, in a privileged way, in the presence of such pathetic weakness, which is at the same time the place of incredible proximity to God. Here, as we touch her relics, Thérèse teaches us to be in touch with our weakness as a way of being in touch with God, whose fingerprints are all over our frailty. In our impotence we encounter his omnipotence, as in no other place. This is her assurance. This is her good news. So she dares us to love our littleness and to discover it as a distinct advantage in our discipleship. 'Love your powerlessness,' she says to us this evening, as she once said to one of her novices, knowing this is the way to experience real power, as St Paul once did - the power of the living God.

Recently I was out walking with a friend along a disused railway line just outside Northampton. Coming in the opposite direction was a young family, Mum, Dad and young daughter, maybe four or five years old. The little girl was running some way ahead of her parents so, not wanting to frighten her, we came off the path to let her run past. But instead of running past, the little girl ran straight up to us. And eyeballing us both she said, 'You don't know who I am do you?' Somewhat covered in confusion as to know how to respond to this, she promptly came to our rescue and said, 'I'm a princess!' She put me immediately in mind of Thérèse! She steals up on us, astonishing us with her innocence, disarming us with her directness, catching us off our stride and thus opening our hearts wide for whatever grace God might have in store. In that enchanting encounter we were overtaken by what never fails to charm us about children and by what they have the blessed ability to put us back in touch with.

Firstly, they live in the immediacy of the present moment. They are not paralysed by what may have happened in the past. They are not fretting about the future. Now is the only world they know. And it is the holy ground on which God wants to meet us. 'Let's only see each moment', as Thérèse once put it.

Or as one of her poems composed which we will be hearing a lot during the coming weeks has it: 'Today, dear Lord, today. Today, dear Lord, today!' Secondly, children know how to trust instinctively, intuitively. I'm sure when that child's parents caught up with her they would have probably told her off for talking to strangers. But that's so hard for children, for whom trust is second nature and who inhabit a world there are no strangers, only friends they have still to get to know. This was the world Thérèse inhabited and in which she could see so clearly that 'trust and nothing but trust must lead us to Love.'

And finally, children know they are significant: 'I'm a princess!' That little girl knew she was important, precious, the apple of someone's eye, the centre of gravity of somebody's world. It was not a significance claimed, like the learned and the clever, for some achievement. She was too young to have achieved anything. She was loved unconditionally, not because she deserved it. Her significance was a fact, given not earned. That's a child's world, the one Thérèse takes us by the hand and leads us into, the one called the kingdom, the one where 'all is grace.' Thérèse got her instinct for this kingdom from parents who loved her to bits. In fact her father called her, not his princess, but his 'little queen.' She knew she filled his horizons – and her heavenly Father's too. One evening when out walking with her Dad she noticed in the night sky the constellation Orion, with the three stars in Orion's belt tracing the cross of the letter 'T' the first letter of her name. Sheer precociousness? Surely! But isn't that what pleases us about children? It certainly pleases God about his children. They are the ones who in the words of the gospel 'know that their names are written in heaven'. Thérèse knew it. And she wants us to have no doubt that ours are written there too.

All these things hidden from the learned and clever, all these precious things that Thérèse is preaching, all these secrets of the kingdom revealed to her, are not only the ones this child wishes to teach us, but which the Child of God, Jesus himself, embodies: the poverty of spirit that means living in the present moment, the conviction that we couldn't be more significant, as the beloved sons and daughters of God, above all the trust that is the hallmark of those sons and daughters. Yes, even weakness itself, since He was like us in all things but sin. Thérèse makes this Jesus, this 'supremely lovely Child' as she once called him, visible to us. She brings him within our reach and makes him real. This is why she is here. This is the reason she has come. And in the presence of her relics, in some mysterious way, she brings out this same child in us. Not just any child, but Jesus.