

## Homily for the Twenty Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (11/19/09)

In the Opening Prayer of today's mass we asked that God would 'make your love the foundation of our lives'. These are easy words to say, and they are pretty uncontroversial; none of us are going to argue with this desire, but we might well ask 'what exactly does it mean' that is to say, what difference will it make to the way we live?

By a happy chance this question relates directly to a little self-indulgence I granted myself on Wednesday. Cathy and I drove to Oxford to pray with the relics of St Therese, which are touring around the country at the moment, and having been there I wish I had taken you with me, because it was an extraordinarily powerful experience. I know there has been some nonsense in the secular press about the visit of the relics, and even some Catholics don't quite understand what this visit is all about, but God must be doing something here because tens of thousands, in fact hundreds of thousands, of people have been to pray with St Therese. Of course, on one level her relics are just bones; they are not lucky charms, they are not magic, but somehow they have the power to make us more aware of her presence, more aware of her life and her writings. The relics of St Therese bring us closer to her, they bring us closer to one another, and they bring us closer to God. When they leave London next week, thousands and thousands of people will have experienced very powerfully the joy of faith and the love of God. I can't think of any event in this country since my ordination where I have felt as close to the heart of the Church as I did at the Oratory in Oxford last Wednesday. We were there for two beautiful liturgies, but most powerful of all was the silence in between, as long lines of people filed past the reliquary and prayed together.

There is something about Therese that draws people, and having drawn people to her then launches them on towards God. Endless homilies have been preached up and down the country about her over the last few weeks, and I don't want to add to that number, but it is definitely true that she helps us to understand that prayer from the beginning of mass when we asked God to make love the foundation of our lives. St

Therese was a great apostle of love; indeed she famously believed that love was her vocation. Looking at the church, and at the various different ministries and vocations within it, she longed to know what God wanted for her. Then she read 1 Corinthians (Therese had a great love for the scriptures) and there she found her answer.

*I knew that the Church had a body composed of various members, but in this body the necessary and more noble member was not lacking; I knew that the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more. I saw and realised that love sets off the bounds of all vocations, that love is everything, that this same love embraces every time and every place. In one word, that love is everlasting.*

*Then, nearly ecstatic with the supreme joy in my soul, I proclaimed: O Jesus, my love, at last I have found my calling: my call is love. Certainly I have found my place in the Church, and you gave me that very place, my God. **In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love, and thus I will be all things, as my desire finds its direction.***

Therese had discovered that not everyone can be a missionary, not everyone can be a priest, not everyone can be a preacher, but everyone can love, and she embraced that vocation to love with a fervour and a single-mindedness that still have the power to inspire and attract us to this day. She knew that to love someone is to make a decision to live your life differently because of them, and she threw herself, body and soul, into loving God. But she was only able to do this because she first knew that God loved her. She realised her limitations, she realised that there were many things that she simply could not do, and rather than be put off by that, or wish that she was someone else, she came to feel very comfortable with herself. God had made her, and God loved her. She was living a quiet, hidden life in one of dozens of convents in a small provincial town, and rather than feel frustrated that she wasn't in a position to do something grander, something more obviously powerful, she simply accepted the life she had – in fact, more than accepting it, she loved it. Once she realised how profoundly God loved her, ordinary and weak as she perceived herself to be, she was free to love him back, and how she loved him. Therese realised that we shouldn't be

overawed by the great and the wise and the important; there is no need to wish we had someone else's life. A simple, quiet, unknown, hidden little life is as important as any other, and as beautiful as any other, and as precious in the eyes of God as any other. Her Little Way is not just about doing ordinary things extraordinarily well; it is about realising that an ordinary life is just as precious as any other, and while we can rightly aspire to achieve good things, we can want to improve the world and make people's lives better, in the end I must live the life I have, not the life I wish I had, or even the life someone else has. God loves me, and however mundane my daily routine may appear, he regards it as infinitely precious. When I appreciate just how much he loves me, I am free to love Him in return, and to help others to do the same.

So Therese helps us see that our Opening Prayer is a call to burst our hearts open, first so that we may be touched by God's love, and then that we may love him in return. In our radical knowledge that we are loved, that we are precious, there is great strength and great power; because of this we can dare to love other people. It is a risk we can take because we know we are loved, we know we are lovable. It is far from a soppy misty-eyed romanticism, it is a conversion, a decision to act differently out of love for others.

Therese had great plans for eternity. Not for her a passive resting in Heavenly bliss. She once said 'I want to spend my Heaven in doing good on earth', and that is precisely what she does. She could never have imagined how the journeys of her relics to over forty countries would accomplish, long after her death, her dreams of being a missionary, but if those visits stir up just a few people to love God more, to give their lives to him more fully, she would have been delighted, because she also once wrote (to Abbe Belliere) 'In Heaven I shall want the same thing that I want on earth: to love Jesus and to make him loved'. The young man in the gospels went away sad – not because he didn't love, but because he loved the wrong things. He did not have that sense of absolute dependence on God that Therese had, and so happiness would always elude him, because life would always be haunted by the fear of loss. Like most saints, Therese shows us that everything of real value is within us, and that knowledge is what opens our hearts to love.