

## St Lawrence Patronal Festival

### SERMON

Today we are celebrating something rather strange; the cruel death of someone who served God and his people with love and dedication. Of course, we are not really celebrating his death as such, but the fact that by his death, his witness to his faith in Jesus Christ was made much more powerful. The threat of death did not deter him from remaining committed to the life Christ had called him to.

The word martyr these days generally means someone who suffers for a cause and who may die for that cause, but not necessarily. It's sometimes used pejoratively to mean someone who advertises their suffering to gain sympathy, especially someone whose suffering is unnecessary. So the sense of suffering has come to the forefront of the meaning of the word. But in the times of the early Church, the word martyr was the Greek word for witness. The word is scattered throughout the New Testament bearing just that meaning and when I learned Greek at college and started reading the New Testament in that language, it felt rather bizarre to see it used for something which is an everyday part of the Christian life.

The word martyr in its modern sense was first used of Stephen, one of the first deacons and the first recorded Christian to die for his faith. It was Stephen's profound faith that enabled him to face death at the hands of the Jews and find in it a cause for rejoicing in the Lord who had brought eternal life to the world. Saul witnessed Stephen's death and it must have worked on him in the days to come so that he was able to hear the voice of Jesus speaking to him on the road to Damascus. So the witness of Stephen led to the conversion of Saul and the spreading of the Christian faith to the civilised world around the Eastern Mediterranean.

Lawrence too was a deacon at Rome, a place Paul never reached on his missionary journeys, but where the Church nevertheless became very strong. Lawrence was an effective deacon, managing the resources of the Church so well that many poor people were helped. In a classic misunderstanding, born of having completely different values, the emperor Valerian believed that Lawrence had amassed great treasure of gold and silver, and decided to help himself to it before killing the deacon as part of a more general persecution which included the killing of Pope Sixtus the Second a few days earlier.

Lawrence and Stephen are jointly patron saints of deacons, the officers of the Church appointed to care for the well being of the people. The Church of England has retained this role and all ordained ministers are ordained deacon first. It is the role that underpins all teaching and administering the sacraments and all leadership. It is also the role that many lay church members carry out when they serve the people of the Church and when they serve the people of the wider community.

Leo the Great, preaching on this festival at the end of the fifth century, said that witness is more effective when it is enacted than when it is spoken about. This is why acts of martyrdom as we currently understand it are so powerful. The idea of dying for a cause impresses us deeply and the example of someone doing it inspires lives and changes hearts. But these acts of martyrdom would have little meaning if there was no life of faith behind them. When wicked people die, we are not impressed by their devotion, but relieved that they are no longer in a position to continue to do evil and feel that they have got their just deserts.

Furthermore, if there is no community of faith from whom the martyr is taken, then there is no one to continue to show how to live in love and service. So the power of martyrdom is not just in the last act of life, but also in the goodness and beauty of the life that was taken and in that of the community of which he or she was a part. The death draws attention to something other than itself, to something in direct contrast to itself, life in all its fullness.

But I would like to explore the inference from Leo the Great that actions speak louder than words. In recent sermons I have shown how we in this parish are very active in serving the Church and the

community. I have mentioned the fact that at the Abbots Langley carnival, at practically every stall there was a member of St Lawrence and Carol Higgs did a photo display at the back of church illustrating it. Our youth work serves children and young people from birth to the age of 19 in different groups in different places, with their families and without. We have a great pastoral team looking after the sick and the housebound, we participate in the bereavement visitors service, good neighbours and many other voluntary services. I could go on. In all this action we follow the example of Christ and of Lawrence.

But if we never speak at all, then who knows who we are or why we are doing what we do? It's all right for the clergy; our dog collars make it clear who we are and give a clue as to why we are doing what we do. But lay people don't have distinguishing marks. If Lawrence hadn't said anything when he brought out all the poor people who had been helped by the Church, what would the Roman judges have made of his action? By interpreting his action with words, they understood that Lawrence valued the poor people as the treasure of the Church and did not value material wealth except as a resource to help others. His words have been recorded and come down to us over nearly 1800 years as an integral part of the story. Indeed, it might even be argued that it was his speech, making it absolutely clear where he stood, that caused him to be condemned to death. It was Stephen's defence of the Christian to the Jews that enraged them and caused them to drag him off to be stoned.

We find it hard to speak because it identifies us clearly with a particular group, set of beliefs and values. The first part of the Mission Action Planning process asks us to survey the surrounding community and find out what its needs are. The steering group presented the PCC with a very innocuous set of questions that we might use to start conversations with people in the village. Yet even these were too difficult and suggestions were made about on-line surveys and leaflet drops. Undoubtedly the questions presented had their deficiencies, but it was the idea of talking face to face with complete strangers about faith that was the problem. The steering group shares the PCC's fears and also suggested that we try to talk to each other first, to get used to expressing our faith in words as well as actions.

This issue will be brought to the whole congregation in the autumn, long after I am gone, and is part of a project that will continue over the next few years. As I leave, I would ask you to trust in Christ who has called you to serve him and his people in this place. I would ask you to trust him to help you find a way and the courage together to speak about him to those who don't know him. As you find the words and the approach and start to speak, I would be very surprised if you were put to death. But you will become martyrs every bit as powerful as Lawrence both in the loving service that you give and in the understanding you will give to people of the God who loves you and them so much, that he was willing to lay down his life.