

St Lawrence Day, 2017

Matt. 13:44-46

The plan was for this building, and this congregation, never to exist.

The most powerful man in the world, the ruler of all he surveyed, the commander of the world's most awesome military force and ruthless State apparatus had decreed it. Christianity was to end.

And so in the year 258, Emperor Valerian of Rome told his men to kill every bishop, priest, and deacon they could get their hands on. They were also to rob and enslave any layperson who refused to renounce the faith. They started with the Bishop of Rome himself, Pope Sixtus, and then they moved onto his clergy – among them deacon Lawrence, the one charged by the church in Rome with the job of caring for the poor. They came for them all, and they killed them.

That was in the year 258. No-one remembers Valerian now, but despite all his soldiers and their swords, we are Christians. And there are churches dedicated to Lawrence the deacon, servant of the poor, all over the world. The Empire may have killed him, but to God Empires are nothing but vain, empty, boastful things. Their power and glory crumbles to dust. Lawrence is alive not only in our memories and in our building, but alive in the risen Jesus, alive and shining with joy and power.

That's the first thing we celebrate on St. Lawrence Day: God has won, and Caesar has lost forever and decisively. And all those who think like him – who think that soldiers and swords, bombs and bullets rule the world – they too have lost forever, and lost decisively. That's the faith, and it is wonderful.

The second thing we celebrate on St. Lawrence Day is his astonishing answer to the soldiers who turned up to kill him. They were keen, first, to get the Church's money – remember those words of Paul, the love of money is the root of all evil. Where's the treasure, they demanded of Lawrence? Where's the precious gold and silver?

And Lawrence turned and pointed to the poor he cared for – to the old, the crippled, the destitute, the abandoned child, the mentally disabled – and he said: there. There's the treasure of the Church.

Lawrence lived in a world where people did not think like that. He lived in a world where the poor, the weak, the lame were disposable. It didn't matter how you treated them. You could use them, abuse them and throw them away. That was Valerian's world. Lawrence stood for a different one; he shared a different one – where people were precious. Where even the least powerful, the least wealthy, the least attractive were to be treated as treasure, as the precious image of God.

That's the world the church is called to be – a place where no-one is disposable, no-one is cast aside: not the child, not the person with Alzheimers, not the prisoner, not the refugee, not the guilty person, not the crazy person, not the sad person. A place where *all* are treasures. *All* are pearls of great price: whom God wants so much, that He has given all that He had to buy them. He wanted *you* so much, that He gave all that He had to buy you.

The poor, the sick, the crippled, you, me. All of us have been bought by God, all of us because of Jesus are on the way to glory. We have a Church so we can learn that about ourselves, and learn what it means for how we treat each other.

That's why Lawrence's Church came out of Rome, and came to England, and came here, and built this church. That's why, as the anthem says, this place was made by God. Made for us to learn what it is to treasure each other. What it is to be treasured. It is truly good to be here, and good to celebrate St Lawrence's Day with St. Lawrence's people – especially with his *newest* people, our newly baptised little ones. Our treasures.

And so we give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.