

St Lawrence

Today the Church celebrates the life and witness of St Lawrence. I have to confess that Lawrence is one of my favourite saints. I have lived in the parish of St Lawrence here in York for getting on for forty years now. With St Jerome he is the patron saint among other things of librarians, my former profession. And he was what we now call a permanent or distinctive deacon. However, it was the way in which he witnessed to his faith that why he is remembered today.

Lawrence was the senior of the seven deacons of Rome under Pope Sixtus II. All eight were martyred in the year 258 during the persecution of Christians ordered by the Roman Emperor Valerian.

Lawrence was responsible for the church's treasury and riches and for the distribution of alms to the poor. According to the earliest source the Emperor passed an edict in 258 that all bishops, priests and deacons were to be immediately executed, and all church property confiscated.

After the Pope's execution it is said that Lawrence was given three days in which to gather and bring the church's wealth. Instead he distributed it among the poor. At the appointed time when he was to deliver the church's riches he brought instead poor and ill people, and is reputed to have said: "These are the treasures of the Church". As one might expect this did not go down well with the authorities and Lawrence was put to death. The story of his being put to death on a gridiron came much later.

That may have happened a very long time ago but the example of Lawrence still has much to teach us today. It reminds us that the true treasure of the Church is people, not least the poor and suffering, the vulnerable and the unloved. They are far more important than any material treasures against which are Lord warned in our reading just now, the Gospel for the feast of St Lawrence (Matthew 6.19-24).

Lawrence also reminds us that there are times when the Church has to stand up against those who misuse power for their own ends. The Church has to stand up for justice. Not only are we to care for the poor and the suffering but we are also to work for the elimination of poverty and suffering, of conflict and exploitation.

Lawrence remains a potent example for us today. He challenges us in our Christian witness in our world today, which in many respects is not so different from his own. For circumstances may change but human nature does not. There is still greed, ambition and lust for power and domination. There is still selfishness. Lawrence shows us instead the better way of compassion love, God's love.

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