Homily Requiem Mass

Homily

I have asked myself how Bede would have wanted us to celebrate this Requiem. I think he would want us firstly to worship God, secondly to give thanks to God, and thirdly to pray for the repose of his soul. Worship God; give thanks to God; pray to God.

We offer this Mass in Eastertide when we particularly celebrate our hope in the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ – in St Paul’s words:

“With God on our side who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we can be certain, after such a great gift, that He will not refuse anything he can give. Christ Jesus not only died for us – he rose from the dead, and there at God’s right hand he stands and pleads for us”.

As we celebrate God strengthens our hope in the resurrection. We give praise and thanks to God with Bede, who put all his hope in the God of life.

Bede would have wanted us to give thanks to God for all the blessings he received in the course of his life; for our Heavenly Father is the giver of all good gifts. On our part we would want also to give thanks to God for all the blessings He brought to us through Bede. The tributes and appreciations that we have received bear eloquent testimony to these many blessings.

Bede’s family meant a huge amount to him throughout his life and to the very end. He was the fifth of seven children, born in 1931 just after the family had settled in his beloved Somerset. He was ever grateful for the gift of faith that came through his parents’ teaching and example. The loving security of family life was a great blessing, and the annual gatherings of the wider family always brought him real joy and gratitude. I know that his priestly and avuncular presence was greatly valued by the family.

Despite living only fifteen miles from the Benedictines at Downside, Bede, from the age of nine, was educated by the Jesuits in Lancashire. By his own account he did not take easily to classroom education at Hodder and Stonyhurst, but he did thrive in the countryside and on their farm. The large Jesuit community impressed him, and the seed of a priestly vocation was sown there.

But first he was drawn to farming. He loved and marvelled at the natural world. He was practical by temperament. He was down-to-earth and mixed easily with men of the soil. Bede came to Worth in 1955 to become the farm manager, working under the monastic bursar, Dom Victor Farwell. The welcome and encouragement he received from the community helped to germinate the seed of his vocation. He remained profoundly grateful for the gift of this vocation.

After Worth became an Independent monastery in 1957, Bede was our first novice, being clothed in February 1958. He was drawn to the life of prayer. In a recent interview in the school magazine he spoke of the place of prayer in his life:

“I couldn’t live without it. I don’t know how I would handle life’s challenges without the knowledge that God has a purpose for me. I pray whenever I can. As monks we all do at least thirty minutes of private prayer every day as well as reading the scriptures, attending the monastic offices and so on. It is a kind of basic food for life. Without it life wouldn’t have much meaning”.

The years of the Vatican Council deepened his love of the Church and of God’s word in the Bible. He was ordained priest in 1963, but was already nurturing and developing the faith of others in the School and through the innovative Worth Conferences.

Bede brought to pastoral work a hands-on attitude, boundless enthusiasm, a pioneering spirit and an impatience for action. He was not always a team player, but he was always animated by the teaching of the Gospel.

“For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me”. And Jesus said: “In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me”.

Perhaps this passage helped Bede see that meals and refreshments were a key part of his pastoral work. Some even said that he was not so much “a desert father” but “a dessert father”.

Over the years his pastoral ministry took place in the School, the Abbey parish, the Deanery, the Diocese, and even nationally through CAFOD and the 1980 National Pastoral Congress. The great number of tributes bear testimony to the lives God has touched through Bede’s warmth, humanity, sense of fun, compassion and wisdom.

For Bede his eleven years in Peru were a wonderful blessing. The iconic picture of Bede with a tractor on a raft in the River Apurimac captures so much about him. 1967 to 1978 were heady days in Latin America, and Bede was strongly drawn to Liberation Theology and knew some of its earliest proponents such as Gustavo Gutierrez. It was personal contact that truly motivated him. He spoke recently of his time in Peru:

“It was life changing. I had a number of experiences where people displayed enormous wisdom and courage in the face terrible difficulties and family suffering, and I think I returned a changed person. When I came back to Worth I missed being with them terribly. You know they say that you should see Christ in other people. Well, I think I discovered Him in them”.

Accepting Abbot Victor’s decision that he should return to Worth in 1978 was the most challenging time in Bede’s monastic life. The vow of obedience and a prayerful faith in God’s will helped him through. He was my novice Master from 1981 and this monastic example was a powerful one for me. The novitiate is meant to be a time of testing for the new entrant, but it can also be a testing time for a Novice Master: and this proved to be the case for Bede over subsequent years. In the end novice master and the novice trust that God can write straight on our crooked lines.

Active into his 80’s, Bede brought his enthusiasm to such roles as monastery archivist. He remained curious to read about new subjects. But inevitably Bede’s health and vigour declined. It was the same Bede and yet he mellowed, he accepted personal care more readily, and was patient with his diminishment. In this he greatly valued the loving support of his family. The gentle yet firm care he received from Brother Anthony and the care staff could reduce him to tears of gratitude. It was indeed a gift to the community to care for him till his death on Sunday 10th May, when he died peacefully in his monastery cell.

Bede would certainly want us to pray for him, that the merciful Lord would welcome his good and faithful servant into His peace. Bede’s confidence was not in his own merits but in God’s love:

“For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

We worship you our God; we thank you for all your gifts; we pray to you to be merciful to our brother, Bede, and to offer consolation to all who mourn him.

Let me adapt the ending of a homily that Bede preached at a funeral:

“We can take from this celebration today the quiet joy of knowing that Bede has begun his risen eternal life, besides which his life on earth has been less than the smallest grain of sand: that, in fact, his life far from ending has just begun! May Almighty God grant him eternal life. And may he rest in peace. Amen”.