

Homily of the Right Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP
Bishop of Nottingham
Parish of Christ the King, Mackworth
Saturday 1st / Sunday 2nd March 2014 – Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the Gospel which we have just heard (*Mt 6:24-34*), Jesus tells us not to worry about our lives. Rather we are called to set our hearts on the Kingdom of God, and all these other things – food, drink, clothes – will be given to us. This is not very practical advice but the point that Jesus is making is that God must come first; as Christians, we are asked to make God the prime focus of our lives. If we get our relationship with him right, then our other relationships will fall into place and we can live in harmony with God, each other and ourselves.

But Saint Paul reminds us in today's Second Reading (*1 Cor 4:1-5*) of the awesome responsibility in the sight of others which comes with being a follower of Christ: 'people must think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God'. As baptised Christians, whether ordained or lay, we hold within us a treasure that is like the pearl of great price, the Holy Spirit. And at Holy Communion, Christ himself comes to dwell within us. As his servants, we are sent on a mission at the end of each Mass to glorify the Lord in our lives, to proclaim his Good News, to be Christ to the people of Mackworth, and we are expected, in Saint Paul's words, to 'be found worthy of his trust'.

I regret very much that one of your parish priests, Paul Cullen, did not make God the centre of his life; he was not found 'to be worthy of his trust' and he committed terrible offences against innocent children. The gravity of those offences was made worse by the fact that he was a Catholic priest, a priest who was entrusted in a particular way with the mysteries of God.

This is a cause of shame for me, your Bishop, for the good and hardworking priests of our Diocese whose names have been besmirched by his actions, and for all of us. I am truly sorry for the wrong that has been done by Cullen to his victims and their families; their trust was betrayed and their dignity violated.

I am also mindful of the effects that the recent proceedings have had on your parish and the wider community here in Mackworth, in other parishes where Cullen served, and beyond. There are all sorts of emotions which we will be feeling in the light of his arrest and last Monday's verdict: anger; bitterness; betrayal; shame. Some of you may have fond and happy memories of his time here, remembering the good he did, and do not understand fully what is going on; that is fine, because we cannot help how we feel.

The abuse of children, in whatever form it takes, is reprehensible – it is evil, a scourge on society and family life, and, when it is perpetrated by priests, a scourge on the Church of which we are all members. It is thanks to the bravery of Cullen's victims, in this parish, in Hyson Green and in Buxton, and their willingness to come forward and no longer be kept silent by this man, that Monday's verdict was brought about.

I am pleased that Paul Cullen has accepted responsibility for his behaviour and pleaded guilty. I can assure you that we have worked closely with Derbyshire police and will continue to do so. The Catholic Church takes the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults extremely seriously, and it is our hope and expectation that no child or vulnerable adult should ever suffer at the hands of another, whoever that other may be, in church, in school or at home. We will ensure that our churches and parishes are safe and welcoming for all members of the community.

I am genuinely convinced that the necessary changes which have come about within both Church and society as a result of a new and better awareness of child abuse and its devastating effect on victims and their families mean that no one in the future will be able to do what Cullen did – and that if, God forbid, someone were to do so, we have the means to deal with the matter appropriately and honestly.

There is nothing that can take away the horror that Cullen has done to his victims and I hope that his pleading guilty and his sentencing on 24th March will help to bring them peace. But I also hope that, in time, by the grace of God and with the help of their families, friends and professional support workers, and with the prayers of the many people who have been saddened and angered by what has happened, the hurt which I am sure that they still feel will, even though it is many years down the line, begin to be healed. I believe, deep in my heart, that when the victims came forward and made their statements, it was a graced moment for them, and for all of us – the foundation stone for a better future for themselves and for our community.

We do not know everything, but we do know as Christians that, in the words of our First Reading (*Is* 49:14-15), even if we feel abandoned by others, God never forgets us. He stands with us in the ups and downs of our lives and loves us with a love beyond compare. It is our task to share that love with those whom we live, and particularly those whom we do not love as we ought. I hope and pray that, as we begin to rise from what has been for many a long Good Friday, we will pledge ourselves anew to be people who believe, who hope, who love, who want to glorify God in all that we say and do, and do what is best for our brothers and sisters. Then we will truly be 'Christ's servants', doing his will and putting it into practice in our daily lives.

May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds!

Rt Rev Malcolm McMahon OP
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