

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

The Feast of Saint Dominic

Monday 8th August 2022

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Let me thank the Cathedral, and particularly the Bishop, and the Chancellor, Rev'd Dan, for the invitation to speak here today. I have to say, the invitation came as a surprise – it is not often that people take an interest in St Dominic, at least outside of the Order he founded (to which I belong); usually, it's his more famous contemporary St Francis of Assisi who sucks up all the glory. But that makes it all the more a pleasure to be asked to come and share with you something of the inspiration that we Dominicans draw from our founder, and that all Christians might draw in their efforts to preach the Gospel in the 21st century.

There's an ancient story about an Indian sage. One day, as this wise old man sat in meditation by a pleasant pool of water, a scorpion scuttled along and fell in. The sage, braver man than I, reached in and drew the creature out: the scorpion predictably demonstrated his gratitude with a sting. The sage, clearly a hardened ascetic, wasn't fazed, and returned to his meditation while the scorpion returned to scuttling about – until it fell in a second time. The old man dutifully reached in his hand and drew the creature out, and once again the scorpion gave him a sting. Some minutes later as the sage sat in meditation and the scorpion scuttled about – well you can see where this is going. Anyway, watching on like us and equally perplexed was a disciple of the sage, who at this stage stood up and interrupted the proceedings. "You know, master," he said, "that every time you reach your hand into the pool and grasp the scorpion it will sting you. So why do you keep doing so?" "My son," replied the sage, "stinging is just what a scorpion does and is meant to do. But to humans, it is given to have mercy, and to save."

This tale is of Hindu provenance, but reminded me of an episode in the life of St Dominic. At the beginning of the 1200s, in his mid- or late-thirties, Dominic found himself in the south of France, wandering about and preaching against the heresy of the Cathars or Albigenses. Up until this point, Dominic had spent most of his adult life stationed at a cathedral in rural Castile, in Spain; after a diplomatic mission with his bishop, seeing the dire state of the church in southern France, he and the bishop petitioned to be allowed to stay there, where they thought they could be more useful. The heresy against which they preached was a thoroughly life-denying philosophy, one which maintained that the material world was basically evil, but it had gained traction among a very poor population alienated by the wealth and seeming distance

of the Church. Dominic responded by preaching the true Gospel living among the people, sharing their poverty; others, inspired by his example, began to join him, forming the beginnings of what would become his Order.

On one occasion, Dominic and his companions had lost their way in the middle of Cathar territory. A local, seeing them evidently lost, realising what they were about, and noticing that they wore no shoes (a sign of their poverty, depicted in the icon we are going to bless), said he would lead them back to the right path. In fact, what he did was to walk them several miles in the wrong direction, through briars and brambles and nettles off the beaten track. Dominic and his companions were not totally naïve – at a certain point they realised that they had been had, but they carried on following. And, indeed, as they carried on their way Dominic showed such gratitude and spoke so graciously and smiled so easily that the Cathar was eventually smitten with compunction, begged their forgiveness, listened to their preaching, and led them to the right path. Dominic knew he was being stung, but found it in himself to be merciful, and in doing so he saved the man – for humans, unlike scorpions, are capable of the most dramatic changes of heart.

That, surely, is one of the most important things Christians must believe about their fellow humans – especially those Christians, like Dominic, who intend to preach. All people are capable of a true and total change of heart; we are capable, that is to say, of *repenting*, *seeking forgiveness*, and indeed of *forgiving*; capable of receiving mercy, and of giving it. In the Christian tradition, however, that truth can never be detached from a twin-companion: such changes of heart cannot be brought about by any amount of effort or willpower or goodness of our own – although perhaps they cannot be brought about *without* those either – but always hearts are changed by the grace of God. As the Scripture says, ‘The heart of a man is in the hand of the Lord’ (*cf. Prov. 21.1*). The human capacity for conversion, and God’s grace – two truths that assure us it is worth preaching. But there is a third truth that Christians must believe about their fellow humans, surely the most important of them all: that one of our countless fellow humans, of all those born in the 300 000-year history of our race, is in fact God. God has become human, has reached down in Jesus Christ to save us from sin and death, and has willingly taken all the stings we have given in return for it. This Jesus, in one form or another, is the content of our preaching, the figure around whom anything and everything else we may wish to say is constellated and made sense of.

In the Order, Dominic is referred to by the title ‘Preacher of Grace’. It’s a strange title, because to Christian ears that is surely a tautology. For what does a preacher preach, if not the Gospel of God’s grace? And how does he preach, if not relying on the grace of God? Christian preaching, as we hear from St Paul, is not a matter of proclaiming oneself or one’s own ideas. ‘So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ’ (*Rom. 10.17*).

What the title stresses, I would say, is the *self-effacement* that characterised Dominic's preaching – in the first place, the self-effacement involved in absolute commitment to those three truths: a commitment to the Gospel we have received, and a commitment to the people we preach to, a conviction that it's worth preaching to them.

At a deeper level, Dominic displayed a self-effacement of radical availability for mission, being 'all things for all people'. I've already mentioned that Dominic stands out in the collective memory as less of a personality than St Francis. The difference in the two can be seen in the attitude their two Orders take to the founders. Franciscans typically understand themselves as attempting in one way or another to *imitate* St Francis and carry on his particular spirituality, marked as it is by radical poverty, intense personal devotion, a love of God's creation. St Dominic founded his Order, not to embody a personality or a particular kind of spirituality, but simply to carry on a mission, described in our founding constitution as 'preaching and the salvation of souls'. To take one very concrete example, poverty, for Dominicans, is a means for preaching the Gospel effectively, not an end in itself. It can be an important means of drawing close to people in their affliction. But if the friars in Oxford, where I live, started traipsing around OX1 in rags and with no shoes, I'm not sure it would aid our engagement with the University; certainly, it wouldn't do for us to have no books.

This joins up with a third kind of self-effacement. Dominic, in his day, quietly initiated a kind of revolution in the understanding of religious life. People tended to join monasteries or, like St Francis, to adopt a holy way of living, for the perfectly legitimate reason that this would draw *them* closer to Christ, and benefit *their own* soul, deepen *their* relationship with God; it's still an attitude we see today, and, as I say, a valid one. Yet Dominic recovered an inspiration much closer to that of Christ and the apostles: his followers were not in it primarily for themselves, but for the benefit of others; or, they would draw close to God precisely by looking to minister to others.

This makes me think of Pope Francis in our own day, who continues to warn us how important it is for the Church to avoid becoming inward-looking; if the Church is to remain truly centred on Christ, she also must not lose the centrifugal dynamic of the Spirit which drives her to the margins, to preach in the darkest places, and *above all* where the face of Christ is obscured. He would have us recover some of the urgency of St Paul, a feeling that the Church remains incomplete so long as people remain estranged from her; to reach them, we ourselves need to step into the discomfort of their estrangement, trusting in the help of God's Holy Spirit as we go. The early Dominicans accordingly spoke of the preacher as receiving grace on the rebound, like a pipe that only receives water to give it away. To put the image in more Biblical terms, God wishes the Church to be not a stagnant pool but a flowing river, the river flowing from the

pierced side of the temple of Christ's body, pouring out grace and life and healing through all the world.

If this self-effacement is what Dominic has to teach us, then he also bequeaths us a challenge: to realise that mission, for all the hard-headed practicality and head-on engagement it may require, contains a deeply mystical dimension. St Paul in some of his letters speaks of his missionary work in priestly terms, as making a sacred offering to God (e.g., *Rom.* 15). We heard Isaiah declare, 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings' (*Is.* 52.7): mountains, in Holy Scripture, are always a place of encounter with God. I fear we may be too used to the idea that spiritual life is a matter of turning inside and away, and mission a matter of switching on an outward persona. Are we bold enough, creative enough, apostolic enough, conceive a truly spiritual form of life that is centred on the effort of missionary encounter, contemplating the Gospel 'on our lips' as well as 'in our hearts'?