

Sermon for the Requiem Mass Funeral of BRIAN WOODMAN RIP

By Fr Robbie Low

Brian was a late vocation Anglican priest who cared for the parish of St Merryn in North Cornwall. Brian converted to the Catholic Faith in his eighties and spent much of his remaining years faithfully caring for his beloved wife, Brenda. He was a lovely man.

John 21 - Do you love me?

Brian typically, and like every good priest, did not want a eulogy. We know, from years of Scriptural study, long hours of prayer, repeated yet unique pastoral encounter and the great joy of leading those entrusted to our care heavenward, that what we require, above all at this time, is not vainglorious praise, however well intentioned, but rather to be lifted before the One who called us, on a tide of love and prayer. We do not seek the approval of the world but only the absolution of our sins and the welcome home from Our Lord. Our funerals are indeed, we hope, a time for thanksgiving but that is to God. Personal reminiscences, appreciations, funny stories etc can wait until later when friends and family are down the pub or wherever. Our Requiems are for all that love and joy and thanks to be bundled up and laid at the foot of the Cross as offering and set against our many failures and sins of omission. The priority, in life and in death, remains for us the Preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the liberation of Man from the bondage of sin and his reconciliation with his creator and his restoration to the Paradise of God.

Today's Gospel reminds us powerfully that there are times in the life of every man called to the priesthood when he will stand on the Galilee shoreline and have to answer Jesus' question,

'DO YOU LOVE ME?'

This is not an academic enquiry. It is not an appeal to the response of the intellect or our rational and forensic intellectual equipment. Neither is it an encouragement to be a running victims of our emotions.

When St Paul encouraged us to be 'fools for Christ's sake', he, arguably the most intellectual of the Apostles, was not asking us to be gullible idiots. He was asking us to view the world from the Cross and see everything as loss for the sake of gaining Christ. Foolishness indeed to the world but the essence of the divine wisdom.

Christ's interrogation of Peter on the Galilee shoreline is the most extraordinary heart to heart in the history of Man's encounter with the divine.

Peter, who is profoundly conscious of his repeated misunderstandings, failures, denials, misapprehensions, is pinned down by Jesus and, we might suspect, like us, rightly and hugely embarrassed by Jesus' question.

'DO YOU LOVE ME?'

With Peter we manage a feeble, holding response..... 'I like you.'

'LIKE' is not enough. It is never going to be enough. Approving of Jesus, finding Him a useful guide or guru, warming to His teachings etc is Laodicean lukewarm gruel and not to God's taste.

LOVE alone will enable the disciple to follow Jesus. Love alone will give Peter the grace to be the Servant of the Servants of God.

'LIKE' has critical limits.

'LOVE' knows no boundaries to the Sacrifice the Lover is willing to make for the Beloved. That is the secret of the Cross and the mainspring of the Gospel.....God so loved the world....'

So Jesus presses Peter.... 'DO YOU LOVE ME?'

'I really, really like you. You are my best buddy. We can almost hear the unspoken words....'Please don't push me. This is embarrassing. Guys don't talk like this.'

Friendship, approbation, good will, admiration, imitation, even chosen company don't match up to the depth of the question. Like a drowning

man Peter sees all his past failures swim before his eyes. Like every priest when making their painful confession, he is conscious of his inadequacy, his little denials and betrayals, idiotic failures and his need for mercy and redemption. If he doesn't know that he will never recognise the urgency of the Gospel call and thus fail to love others enough to call them to salvation.

‘DO YOU LOVE ME? ‘

And Brian's answer, as with that of every serious priest, is that heartfelt outburst of passion and surrender.

‘Yes, Lord. You know everything. You know the innermost secrets of my heart. You know that I love you.’ Nothing less will do.

So, as we pray for Brian, servant of the servants of God, let us make anew, in our own lives, that confession of the Galilee shoreline. That declaration that enabled Peter to share the suffering of his Lord and, after his crucifixion on the Vatican Hill, share His glory.

May Brian's suffering and his faithful service, his trusting dependence upon your love and mercy, Lord Jesus, be for his purification and his swift restoration to your eternal and glorious Presence , O Lord.

Brian, may the angels of God welcome you, the prayers of the saints surround you and the Blessed Mother of God enfold you in her loving arms and present you to her Son, our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ.