

Homily: Feast of St Clare 2021

On this day seven hundred and sixty-eight years ago, St Clare was on her death bed in the convent at San Damiano, just outside the city walls of Assisi. She was 59 or 60 years old, and had spent two-thirds of her life in the convent, much of it plagued by illness. In those final days the sisters were gathered round, keeping vigil at her bedside; the Pope came to visit and administered the sacraments to her; and Clare saw, in her words, the “King of Glory” – Christ – coming to meet her as she left this earth. But something else happened in those final days, something which Clare had desperately desired for many years: her Rule of Life was approved for her Order.

This might seem like a relatively small thing to us, but to Clare it was everything. Clare had written her Rule based on the teachings of her friend St Francis and the way of life he had encouraged the sisters to lead. This was the first time in the history of the Church that a woman had written a rule that would be adopted as a way of life for a religious order. All the other orders had rules written by men, adapted for the female branches of their orders; but for the ‘Poor Ladies’, as Clare and her sisters were known, the Rule was written by Clare herself, and only approved by the Pope. This was only possible due to Clare’s tireless determination, and because so many people, including the Pope himself, saw in Clare outstanding qualities of holiness and wisdom.

But there was another reason why Clare’s Rule was exceptional. She insisted, and really had to fight for, what she called the ‘Privilege of Poverty’. Other religious orders had land and money to support their communities, and when people joined them they would sell all they owned and donate the money to the Order. But Clare insisted that her Order would own nothing other than the building in which they lived and the clothes the sisters wore. When a new sister joined, she would sell all she owned and give the money not to the Order, but to the poor. The Pope was not keen on allowing this, because it meant there would be no security for the sisters, but Clare battled over many years for this to be a central part of her Rule. We can see how different Clare was: most people work hard to increase the amount of money they have in the bank, to build up their security; but Clare did the exact opposite: she fought hard to be allowed to give up everything, and to have no security apart from her faith in Christ. She and the sisters wanted to give away all they had and to depend on Providence, putting their trust in God alone. They gave up their security, believing that He would provide for all their needs.

Today’s readings speak of those who have given everything to follow Christ. In the Gospel Peter tells Jesus, “We have left everything to follow You”. And St Paul writes that he “looks on everything as so much rubbish” if only he can have Christ. This means total dependence on Jesus for everything: not just for his material needs, but even on the path to holiness. “I am not trying for perfection by my own efforts”, Paul writes, “but I want the perfection that comes only through faith in Christ.” By giving up everything, Clare and her sisters had to put all their faith in Christ, and this was their path to perfection. They could no longer rely on themselves for anything: they had to accept everything as a gift from Christ. This is the depth of the faith they had, and it bore wonderful fruit in their lives. I know myself that I

am very far from having the same absolute confidence in God's Providence, but I am also grateful for the witness of these faithful women who were able to trust the Lord with such deep faith. Perhaps they will inspire me – perhaps they will inspire us all – to look for security a little less in worldly things, and a little more in Christ.

St Paul today also speaks of “reproducing the pattern of Christ's death” in order to have a share in His resurrection. Clare's whole life was like this. By choosing to give up her significant wealth and inheritance, she died to worldly ambition; in her penance she united herself to Jesus' self-offering for our forgiveness; in her long illness, she shared in the sufferings of Christ. In living as an enclosed nun, she allowed to die within her any notion of being 'useful' to the world, and chose instead to devote herself to prayer. And her life, despite its hiddenness, was incredibly fruitful. What she allowed to die, God blessed with new life: we see both death and resurrection here. By the time Clare died, over 150 communities of Poor Ladies, living the way of life she described, had sprung up all over Europe. In today's Gospel Jesus says that those who have left houses, sisters, mother, children or land for His sake will be repaid a hundred times over: Clare experienced this. Elsewhere Jesus says that those who receive the Word of God with faith and understanding are like good soil which produces its crop a hundredfold. This was Clare's life: hidden like a seed, yet bearing much fruit. Even today many women follow her rule, and many more people look to St Clare for inspiration and ask for her intercession.

Clare left this world on 11th August 1253. She did so with great serenity, a gift which grew from her perfect trust in the Lord. As she lay dying, she said to her soul: “Go forth without fear, for you will have a good escort for your journey. Go forth, for He who created you has sanctified you. He has protected you always as a mother does her child and has loved you with a tender love.” There is no hint of anxiety in her words. She had perfect serenity and trust at that moment, for one simple reason: because she had practised it all her life. She had spent six decades learning to rely less on herself and more on Jesus, and so, when the time came that she could do nothing more for herself, Clare continued to enjoy that same peace and confidence in God. We may never live a Rule of life quite like the one Clare wrote, but let's at least learn from her wisdom. Let's practice a life in which we choose to rely less on ourselves and more on Jesus, not seeking gain but seeking a deeper faith, not looking for passing happiness but for eternal joy with Him.

Fr Andrew

