

Homily: Good Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1916 the French hermit and priest Charles de Foucauld was murdered at his home in the Sahara Desert. On the face of it, he died alone: he had no family or friends nearby; he was miles even from another Christian who could pray for him in that moment. And yet Charles would have known that he was not alone, because for many years he had been aware of Jesus Christ as his constant companion, his ever-present friend. By day he would undertake his tasks, including translating the Gospel into the language of the local people, and by night he would spend long periods praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament – just him and Jesus, together. Charles must have known that Jesus was with him when he died – he knew the Lord’s promise: “I am with you always”. Always, yes, including in times of suffering. The Cross guarantees Jesus’ closeness to us. No one suffers alone, no one dies alone. On the Cross, Jesus is present wherever someone is isolated, anxious, fearful, suffering, sick or dying. We are never alone.

Charles de Foucauld took a long time to learn this. His early life, spent in the army, was fairly wild and extravagant. But eventually he began to revisit the faith he had rejected, and would pray: “God, if You exist, let me know it”. The Lord answered his prayer. Whilst visiting a church in Paris, Charles made his confession, and in this encounter with the merciful love of Jesus, he rediscovered his faith. It radically changed his life. He tried living as a monk, but couldn’t settle, then walked to the Holy Land, where he became a porter at the Poor Clare monastery in Jerusalem. The sisters encouraged him to become a priest, and after his ordination he went to the desert where he hoped to found a religious community. But no one joined him, and he lived as a hermit: just him and the Lord.

Charles wrote a prayer of abandonment which has become well-known and much loved. These are his words to God, words which he lived out in a most extraordinary way:

Father,  
I abandon myself into Your hands; do with me what You will.  
Whatever You may do with me, I thank You:  
I am ready for all, I accept all.  
Let only Your will be done in me, and in all Your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, my God.  
Into Your hands I commend my soul;  
I offer it to You  
with all the love of my heart,  
for I love You, Lord,  
and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into Your hands,  
without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for You are my Father.

I say this prayer every day. And I say it very imperfectly. Not because I want to say it badly, of course – but because it's hard to say these words and really mean them. For me to say, "I am ready for all, I accept all", is hard, because I know there are some things which I would rather avoid. When I say, "I wish only that Your will be done, and no more," I know that it's not entirely true: I have my own will, and it doesn't always align with God's. When I pray, "I surrender myself into Your hands... with boundless confidence" I know that my confidence is not boundless – sometimes my trust in God is lacking. Sometimes I feel safer making my own decisions than I do following the will of my Father in heaven.

But I need not despair, or even worry – especially today. Because today, Jesus Christ, my friend, my brother, my Lord, makes this prayer for me. For us. Let's listen again to Charles' prayer, and imagine it prayed by Jesus on the Cross. Then we will see it perfectly fulfilled:

Father,  
I abandon myself into Your hands; do with me what You will.  
Whatever You may do with me, I thank You:  
I am ready for all, I accept all.  
Let only Your will be done in me, and in all Your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, my God.  
Into Your hands I commend my soul;  
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to surrender myself into Your hands,  
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for You are my Father.

Jesus on the Cross makes this prayer with perfect confidence and trust. He shows us that the prayer He taught us, His prayer in Gethsemane, "Thy will be done", is really the same prayer He makes on the Cross: "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit." It is all about faith, all about trust. It's about knowing – really knowing, deep down – that we have a Father in heaven who only desires our good. To be ready for all, to accept all, to abandon ourselves into the Father's hands without reserve – this is perfect faith. It is the faith of Jesus.

Jesus prays perfectly this prayer which I cannot make with all my heart. In truth, none of us can say these words without reserve, because a part of us always wants to keep control rather than to hand it all over to God. Today, on the Cross, Jesus makes up for all our shortcomings: all the lack of faith, all the times we choose our way over God's way of perfect love, all the times we fight God's will: Jesus makes up for it all. And He does so by a life and death of perfect trust, perfect love, perfect abandonment to the will of His Father. Today Jesus prays perfectly for me, for you, a prayer which we cannot perfectly make ourselves. He offers this prayer to our heavenly Father.

St John tells us today that, as Jesus died, He said, “It is accomplished”. His life’s work is finished. But the word used in the Gospel can also mean, “perfected” – “It is made perfect”, He says. All our imperfections, all our shortcomings, are redeemed, made perfect, by the perfect life and death of our Lord. All our half-hearted prayers and our fragile faith are made perfect by the perfect prayer, the perfect trust, of Jesus.

Charles’ prayer speaks not only of faith and trust, but also of love: “I offer [my soul] to You with all the love of my heart, for I love You, Lord, and so need to give myself.” I love You, and so *need* to give myself. Self-giving is not just the *desire* of love; it is the *need* of love. That’s why we can only be happy when we have a purpose in life, when we give of ourselves. A selfish person is always an unhappy person. We are made for love, and love needs to give. Jesus’ perfect love leads Him today to the perfect act of self-giving: He gives Himself into the Father’s hands with perfect trust, and He gives Himself to us as our Saviour. There can be no greater gift; no greater love. Nothing could be more consoling or more beautiful than this gift.

After Charles de Foucauld had died, some locals came and buried him. Three weeks later, a French army patrol came across the scene and placed a simple wooden cross over his grave. Even there, Charles was not alone, for Jesus was buried on this day too. The soldiers saw that Charles’ hermitage had been ransacked. Amongst the chaos they found a monstrance, thrown down on the ground by Charles’ assassins. It still contained the Sacred Host. The commanding officer took the monstrance upon his horse, and rode at the head of the group as they resumed their journey, the Blessed Sacrament exposed for all to see. This extraordinary Eucharistic procession made its way through the desert, with Christ, present in the Host that Charles de Foucauld had consecrated, leading the way. The Lord Jesus, cast down by murderers, was raised up again and journeyed with His people. This same Lord, crucified and risen, leads us today through the desert of our uncertainties, our lack of faith, our anxieties and fears, our suffering, and even our death. He is never apart from us, and we are never alone. Jesus has gone before us even through death: there is nothing to fear. May the Lord Jesus, by His example and by His grace, give us the deep trust we need to place ourselves with boundless confidence into the hands of our Father.

Fr Andrew

