



Homily for the Rededication of the Shrine of

St David Lewis

Sunday 17th Novemeber 2019

Ss. Francis Xavier & David Lewis, Usk

Archbishop George Stack

I am not sure whether the following words are displayed at the entrance of St. Mary's Priory Church in Usk as they are in many Anglican churches up and down the country.

"Enter this door

As if the floor within was beaten gold,

And every wall of jewels, all of wealth untold.

As if a choir in robes of fire were singing here within.

Nor shout, nor rush, but hush ... for God is here.

Those beautiful words speak of the sacred space which is contained within a church building. They speak of its history, its architecture, and its ministry. They also speak of those who have worshipped there throughout the centuries those who have soaked the walls in prayer. Above all, they speak of the place of communion, not just of so many individual people, but of the body of Christ which gathers to worship in God's way, not in a merely human way. That is why we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer *"Through Him, and with Him, and in Him, All Glory and Honour is Yours Almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen"*. No wonder Cardinal Basil Hume used to say *"Churches are not just places in which we worship God, but with which we worship God"*.

The sacred space of which we speak also extends to graveyards. It is no accident that we bless graves and bury people in “consecrated ground”. Surely no ground is more hallowed and consecrated than a graveyard which contains the remains of our great martyr, St. David Lewis at St. Mary’s Priory. *“The blood of the martyrs is the seedbed of the Church”* wrote St. Irenaeus in the second century. And just as “Remember” lies at the heart of our Eucharistic Faith, so too the re-membering, the putting back together of the heroic life and witness of David Lewis, is the living link of the sacrifice which he and so many others made for our beautiful faith.

You will know his story well. By 1605 Fr. Robert Jones had established in this part of Wales a Catholic mission involving the Jesuits and Welsh secular clergy. This was largely supported by Lady Frances Somerset Morgan of Llantarnam and the rest of the Somerset family at Raglan Castle. Usk, Raglan and Llantarnam are each “Holy Ground” on which our martyrs stood. Not least among them the Jesuit Fr. David Lewis and the secular priest Fr John Lloyd who was martyred in Cardiff just a few days before the death of David Lewis here in Usk. They were known to have been together at the Jesuit College at the Cwm in 1655 before continuing to work on the mission until caught up in the madness of the Titus Oates plot in 1679.

“Churches are not just places in which we worship God but with which we worship God”. The lived memory of the sacrifice Jesus offered on the cross is re-presented each time we celebrate Mass. That memory is reflected in the extraordinary devotion there is to the St. David Lewis, still venerated as “The Father of the Poor” in this part of the world. No wonder he was given a respectful burial in the Anglican churchyard. That is also the significance of the love and care and effort which has gone into the restoration of this Church dedicated to his name and to another great Jesuit missionary, St. Francis Xavier.

The annual procession to the grave of St. David Lewis helps to keep his memory alive. The beautiful renovation of this shrine will open up his story to future generations. Ours is a religion of signs, symbols and sacraments. How wonderful it will be to see and touch and venerate sacred objects which put us in contact with those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, the sign of the cross, the sign of martyrdom.

Buildings are one thing – even church buildings. Memorials and museums are another. Even sacred ground can be encroached upon in the name of “development”. This is

surely the lesson Jesus teaches in today's gospel. *"Some were talking about the Temple, remarking how it was adorned with fine stone and votive offerings"*. Jesus said *"All these things you are staring at now, the time will come when not a single stone will be left upon another"*. Indeed, history tells us that Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. But the Temple he was speaking of was his body. It was on his cross that Jesus offered true worship to God in the sacrifice of his life, death and resurrection. Whilst worship was being conducted in the Temple, the true worship of God was taking place outside the Temple, outside the walls of Jerusalem, on the hill of Calvary, on the cross.

One of the most profound descriptions of the members of the Church is that we are the Mystical Body of Christ. It is through our faith and Baptism that we are drawn together in a living body, the presence of Christ in this place. To be a member of the Church is not being a member of a like-minded, exclusive club. Every one of us, warts and all, are bound together whether we like it or not, through Baptism and in the Holy Communion we share.

Today is a day of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving to the Society of Jesus for their generosity in paying for the new chapel of St. David Lewis and the gift of his portrait which will hang there. To the Heritage Lottery Fund and all who contribute to it. To

our project officers who accompanied the project with skill, expertise and goodwill. To Rita King whose bequest enabled the parish to pay a significant portion of the necessary funding. Thanks to parishioners and residents of the town of Usk for their patience and support of the ongoing work. And to Amanda Needham, to Spithlath our builders and to the experts from the Historic Churches Committee, Heritage Lottery Fund and all those who helped in the planning. And thanks to Fr. Bernard Sixtus for his leadership and guidance bringing this work to fulfilment.

Let the final word go to the great Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas in his poem *"In Church:*

*Often, I try to analyse the quality
of its silences. Is this where God hides
from my searching? I have stopped to listen.
After the few people have gone,
to the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
since the stones grouped themselves about it.
These are the hard ribs
of a body that our prayers have failed
to animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession*

*of places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume
their business. The uneasiness of the pews
ceases. There is no other sound
in the darkness, but the sound of a man
breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.*
