

## Sermon Notes

### Dedication of the Altar at Fisher House

When asked to dedicate your new altar on this great feast of the Trinity I pondered on the meaning of sacrifice and of God's relationship with us. It is God who makes us holy - God who makes us holy by the sacrifice of his son on the altar of the cross.

The altar is stone, or has a stone in it – the stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone – so it is obviously a place for making an offering. Our offering is the un-bloody sacrifice of the fruits of the earth like that of Abel, or bread and wine like the mysterious figure Melchizedek offered – but it is an altar nonetheless.

The altar for us is also a table on which the Lord's Supper takes place; the supper that anticipated the Jesus's sacrifice on the cross the following day. The early Christians hiding from persecution in the catacombs used the tombs of their fellow Christians, who had died for their faith as tables for the breaking of bread, as they called the Supper of the Lamb, or the mass as we know it – so we put relics of our martyrs in the altar today. By a growth of imagery and association the altar of stone soon became identified with Christ's Body, and by an understanding based on the strength of fellowship and communion experienced by them it involves us too, i.e. you and me. We are after all members of Christ's body. So the altar is not just a table – that is to strip it of its most important meaning – the sacrifice of the cross. To do so would, without a sacrifice and without a body, make anointing it

senseless. It is yet another powerful reminder of how God reaches down to us to offer us his mercy and love. There are many ways in which God does this. Let me talk about three of them from my own experience.

When I was a young child my mother occasionally brought me to the Catholic Church in Somers town which was the church she attended when she grew up. Above the High Altar in St. Aloysius' church, was a large triangle with an eye at its centre – the eye of God. Which was all watching, all seeing, situated above and beyond us. This was the way we were often taught about God. The triangle somehow explains the trinity; three sides yet one figure. But its main purpose as an image of God was to keep us all in our place, on our best behaviour, not daring to step out of line because this God saw not just our actions but into our hearts as well. This image of God is only partly true. It doesn't show how God is involved with us in a very intimate and personal way, unlike the altar which is a meeting point for God and man, a place where God's love for us becomes really present.

Now let me present to you another experience of God. Some years ago I went to visit one of our priests in Jamaica. He was in the Eastern end of the country in Morant Bay, working with some Belgian Sisters trying to rebuild a church that had been blown down in a hurricane, Gilbert I think was called. As well as putting the building back together, he was also helping the people rebuild their community. This was especially true amongst the poorest of the poor. For the first time in my life I met people who had nothing: no shelter except a sheet or two of corrugated iron, no

possessions, no homes, no hope. They reminded of Christ, stripped naked for his crucifixion. As part of their work, the Belgian sisters gave these people the scriptures. What a waste of time, you might say. Surely some food, clothing money or whatever would be a better gift. Well, the sisters did share what they had but it didn't go far. The word of God in the scriptures when shared amongst the people who met in groups in a little clearing in their shanty town. The scriptures showed them that God loved them and valued them, that these people who were not much different in most peoples' eyes from the rubbish they lived off in the town dumps were actually worth something, worth dying for. They mattered to God, to each other and to themselves. With this gift of God they were able to work together as a community, set up a shop to buy things in larger quantities, they were able to plant corn together and build somewhere to meet, to read the Scriptures and to pray, they built little houses which became homes. It all started with the word of God. It was redemption in action, mind-blowing and moving.

Some time ago, I was standing in a gas chamber in Auschwitz, looking at the trolleys that took the bodies of the mainly Jewish victims to the incinerators. I felt that something was missing – at first I thought of the obvious; there were no bodies, after all they had all been burnt. The former chief rabbi, Lord Sacks says that the question we should ask is not where was God during the holocaust but where was humanity. I wish I had thought of that at the time but I was struck by the emptiness of the place. There were plenty of signs of death, of course. One display case was full of children's shoes; another full of human hair, yet another showed

the opened and empty cans of Cylcon B, the agent that produced the deadly gas. But no bodies. My thoughts turned to the empty tomb and of how the women and the disciples felt when they discovered that all their hopes amounted to nothing. I felt shocked. Then I realised that for the first time in my life I had really experienced the absence of God. God was present to me by his absence. This was really a most terrifying moment, but one which deepened my own understanding of our God. Where was God throughout the holocaust. As Christians we say he was in the gas chambers, on the trolleys being pushed into the incinerators. He was in the heaps of hair and discarded human possessions. God wasn't up on the wall looking down on his people in their moment of need with one eye through a triangle. He was with them in their suffering, in their pain and desolation. He had exchanged the cross for the gas chamber. When we gather at this altar of sacrifice there is our crucified and resurrected Jesus – in our midst.

In offering you these three experiences of God, you, too, may find a God who is there for you in all your moments. On this feast of the Blessed Trinity I am not trying to offer you an explanation of the Blessed Trinity – God forbid I should try such a thing with so many eminent theologians before me today. In this block of stone we find a God who loved us so much that in his mercy he called us to be with him. He shared in our sufferings, but doesn't remain inert or inanimate like stone but endures like rock in his living word.

When we talk of God as Trinity we can talk of God's life and how the Father, Son and Spirit relate to each other. St. John Damascene said their relationship was like an eternal dance, a

kind of heavenly three-hand reel. St. Augustine tells us that the Son is the expression of the Father in word and flesh, and the Spirit is the love of one for the other. But to be honest, unless that has some bearing on you and me, it doesn't really matter what goes on in God's life. We are not like an ancient people dodging the fallout from the anger of the Gods. This altar is not a place to offer sacrifice to appease an angry god, but a place to meet the true God whose presence is made real through the loving sacrifice of his Son, Jesus, and whose Spirit lives in us.