

5th Sunday of Year B (2015)
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

In the past when asked in South Africa where I am from in the UK I have described where I work as 'the north of England', or 'two hundred miles from London', or 'not far from Manchester' (many South Africans support Manchester United from afar). I would not say 'Rotherham' because no one had heard of Rotherham. They have now. Sky News is popular with the many who have satellite TV. So I still don't say precisely where I work. And if people know, and our town is mentioned by name, I get a sad look of sympathy.

Now they will have heard of Rotherham again, and again for terrible reasons, which bring back to the fore all the horrors revealed in the Jay Report. Since last Wednesday we also know from the Casey Report that the Council was unfit for purpose; inactive as elected members and officers feared accusations of racism; were absurdly PC; and, most grievously, have been in denial about the extent of the abuse revealed in the earlier report. We have been appallingly led, lamentably badly served; and the children of this town in great numbers have suffered appalling abuse, unacknowledged even now by those who have responsibility for them. Rotherham is notorious world-wide; a synonym for bad-governance.

One cause of this complex state of affairs is complacency arising from many years in power of the same political group. With no effective opposition, no insightful criticism, no challenge, inevitably a culture of jobs for our own has arisen and deafness to any criticism, meaning that there was no accountability for anyone from anywhere. That situation matches the state of affairs in national government in South Africa, which may be why I received looks of sympathy. The people there know our situation very well.

The ANC, the African National Congress, the party of Nelson Mandela, has been in power for twenty years. Many good things have happened, but not enough, and not quickly enough. The shacks of Khyalysha (a word which means 'new home') stretch far across the plain outside Cape Town and vanish in the haze. Many have electricity now, but latrines are outside and visiting these facilities in the dark is a dangerous venture. The movement of black people from the poverty of the Eastern Cape to the prospective affluence of Cape Town is inevitable, but encouraged by national government as they represent votes for the ANC, and the Western Province is run by another party, the DA, the Democratic Alliance, which is generally well led by Helen Zille, a woman, and white.

The ANC is an alliance of disparate groups who were united only in the cause of overthrowing apartheid. Amazingly they have remained, more or less, united, though the fault lines are more visible each year. Consequently the ANC has a vast majority in Parliament and believes it can run the country as a fiefdom. The State President, Jacob Zuma, who came to power ending his speeches by singing "Get me my

machine gun”, has spent tens of millions of rands on creating a luxurious compound for his family (he has many wives in the Zulu custom) and the tax-payer has paid. He has been investigated and found guilty, but refuses to admit any guilt. The corruption across government is immense. The newspapers and media reveal scandal after scandal, and are threatened with a silencing Act of Parliament. The courts have been independent, but are being filled with friends of the ANC. It is an example of power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely. Not too different to the power abuse that has shamed our own town.

In today's Gospel, we hear a description of a typical day in the life of a working Messiah. Jesus is unstinting in his efforts to heal the sick, to proclaim the Good News, and to recharge his batteries in prayer, early in the day, in a lonely place. Jesus is a model in the use of power to provide for others, not for self. A key phrase in the Gospel of Mark to summarise Jesus' ministry is his self-description: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve”. Many well paid people in sundry walks of life like to describe the task as 'serving', while taking huge salaries, and giving themselves massive bonuses. The key to service lies in the continuation of Jesus' statement: “and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Service, in Jesus' terms, requires giving up everything. Again Jesus reveals the nature of God to be found, not in accumulation, but in renunciation; not in acquisition but in self-sacrifice.

Paul writes about preaching the Gospel. It is his all-consuming vocation. He is compelled to proclaim the Good News of Christ. It is our calling too. As St Francis said, it is the vocation of every Christian to preach the Word of God, and when necessary to use words. Our preaching is in the way we live our lives; the example we project; the values we live by. Preaching the word is always a costly business because we are not trying to gain anything for ourselves. Indeed we open ourselves to anguish and suffering in the manner of Jesus, and Paul and Francis. It was the little man of Assisi who said, “It is in giving that we receive; and in dying that we are born to eternal life”.