

Homily for Saint Hugh's Day

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For the record, I don't believe in reincarnation. But if I did, and if I had to be reincarnated as an animal, I would come back as a St. Bernard dog. I have my reasons. First, I'd like to be a saint, and this is as about close as I'll get. Second, I believe in searching for the lost. Third, everyone loves a good dog, so there is a chance of being both liked and gainfully employed, and you can rarely do *both* of these in the church – trust me on this. And finally, a rescue mission that involves a hip flask full of malt whisky can't be all *that* bad. Indeed, find or lose your victim, it still ends with a well-deserved drink. (Even though I'm tee-total).

One of the more famous quotes from another saint of the same era as Bernard is from Benedict: "Before all things and above all things, care must be taken of the sick; so that the brethren shall minister to them as they would to Christ himself; for he said: "[I was sick and ye visited me'.]" [*Rule of St. Benedict*]. Benedict had read his gospel: "Jesus went forth and saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion towards them, and he healed their sick" [*Matthew 14:14*].

Saint Hugh of Lincoln (circa 1135–1140 to 16th November 1200), was a French nobleman Benedictine and Carthusian monk, Bishop of Lincoln and Catholic saint. At the time of the Reformation, he was probably the best-known English saint after Thomas Becket. His feast is observed by Catholics on 16th November and by Anglicans on 17th November.

Henry II of England, as part of his penance for the murder of Thomas Becket had established a Carthusian charterhouse which Hugh presided over. Hugh was made the Bishop of Lincoln in 1186, but like Becket before him, wasted no time in establishing his independence from Henry II, resisting monarchical interference, and standing his ground against the King. As the Bishop, Hugh was exemplary in kindness, constantly in residence or travelling the diocese; generous in his charity, and raising the quality of education at the cathedral school.

Hugh was a highly controversial for his time, and went out of his way to protect the Jews from persecution and massacre, great numbers of whom lived in Lincoln at the time. Hugh put down popular violence against them.

After Lincoln Cathedral had been badly damaged by an earthquake in 1185, Hugh set about rebuilding. Hugh was a legendary diplomat overseas, but on one of his many diplomatic missions for the crown, succumbed to ill-health and died. In 1200 he consecrated St Giles' Church Oxford, and in commemoration of the consecration, St Giles' Fair was established and continues to this day each September.

That said, some of our most famous Saints can be difficult people. Consider the prominent English Roman Catholic who was beatified by the Pope earlier in the 20th century. John Fisher died a martyr's death in the Reformation, and is remembered for his holiness, scholarship and courage. But also for being stubborn and harsh.

In his lifetime he had also played a substantial role in a Cambridge College, and the Pope's initiative and the elevation of John Fisher posed a particular problem for the editor of the then *College Magazine* – how to carry the news. A lengthy feature article somehow seemed inappropriate, especially as the College was quite anti-clerical and atheistic. The solution was beautifully simple. The report of Fisher's beatification was duly carried under 'News of Old Members'.

It is easy to be humorous with hagiology – the study of Saints. I have made up quite a few my time, and managed to convince some quite clever congregations into believing there really is a Patron Saint of marmalade (Saint Keillor); or one for dropped toast landing butter side up (Saint Ivel). Saint Bruno was the Patron Saint of pipe-smokers, but due to universal smoking bans, we seldom meet any devotees these days. We all know that St. Michael is the Patron Saint of Competitively-priced Underwear.

But there really are saints for travellers, sore throats, children, pets and television. Most world faiths have saints – at least of sorts. For these are the people who live out holy lives to the fullest, and light our way. Saints serve a serious purpose in life, and we ignore their function at our peril.

One of my all-time favourites is Wilgefortis, the Patron Saint of unhappily married women. A Portuguese Christian martyr, her story is that she prayed to become unattractive rather than get married off to a pagan king in Sicily. Legend has it that she duly grew a moustache, and her suitor withdrew. (Odd, really, since facial hair is hardly grounds for divorce).

Wilgefortis, however, rejoiced that her virginity was still intact and she could now devote her life to prayer. Alas, her father was unimpressed, and had her crucified. Whilst on the cross, so tradition claims, she prayed her suffering would liberate all who were 'encumbered'. Her cult eventually spread to England. Thomas More complained about the devotion to her (by now known as 'Saint Uncumber'), which for reasons that should perhaps best not be explored, enjoyed a high concentration of devotees in East Anglia. The local custom was to leave a 'peck' of oats at her statue by Dusk, on the basis that the Devil would be sure to be riding through the village that night. The oats would tempt the Devil's horse to stop for refreshment, giving Satan a five-minute break during which he could apprehend the errant husband.

Saintliness is next to Godliness, so we would do well to start with what we know of God. Namely, Jesus – the Verb of God made flesh. Jesus is the body language of God. He hears the unheard and the muted; sees the unseen and blinded; feels for those who are marginalised and shut away; touches the untouchables; embraces bereavement, death and the dead – for to God, we are all only truly alive in Christ. So in our grief and pains, he sits with us, comforts us, holds us and loves us.

So what does this ask of us? Well, can you and I also become the body language of God? Fearless in care? Compassionate, generous and gracious? Good to the point of goodness being natural, as though spliced into our very being – something that is coursing within our DNA?

A couple of years ago, Caroline Flack, the former TV host of *Love Island*, took her own life following a relentless amount of bullying on social media. But in her final social media post before her tragic suicide, aged only 40, she left a message not of despair, but of hope.

So what did Saint Caroline of Flack say? In her final Instagram post from December 2019, she wrote: "In a world where you can be anything, be kind". Be kind. Another very famous Dean once said this: "in a harsh world, only the gentle are truly strong". By the way, that famous Dean was James Dean. But here we have two celebrities with their untimely deaths, leaving us a message of hope: be kind; be gentle. Saints know that is true strength.

A popular story from World War Two tells of a Romanian Christian who was imprisoned at Belsen, and deprived of all he needed to sustain his faith: no crucifix, bible, icons, devotional books, corporate worship or knotted prayer beads. So he prayed in secret – that he might respond to the call of love. He found himself spending time in the camp with the sick, the starving, the diseased, the dying and the betrayers – all those who were shunned by others.

One day, as the camp drew close to liberation, an atheist – a priest, in fact, who had his own faith shattered by the experience of war – came to see the Romanian and said, ‘I see how you live here. Tell me about the God you worship’. And the Romanian replied: ‘He is like me’.

Who amongst us could ever reply: ‘he is like me’? As the gospels hint, it is the example that makes the difference, not the ideas; the praxis, not the theories. Our call remains simple: to become like Christ. Because all saints can be very ordinary people, just like you and me.

There is a story about a Rabbi who was asked to comment on the book of *Genesis*. The rabbi paused, and noted that God had taken six days to make the heavens, the earth, and all living creatures. After each act of creation, whether it was the light, land, oceans, plants, or any of the animals, God had pronounced them to be *good*. But on the sixth day, after God had created man and woman, the pronouncement of ‘good’ from God is conspicuously withheld.

However, the rabbi cautioned his audience against concluding that humanity is not good. Instead, the rabbi noted that the term ‘good’ is actually a misleading translation of the original Hebrew word, *tov*. *Tov* simply means ‘complete’, ‘finished’ or ‘sufficient’. And to complete his commentary, the rabbi added, you have to remember that humanity is not *tov*; we are still work in progress – incomplete.

Our achievements will not be the measure of us; for we will be also judged by our wisdom and virtue, and only the whole of our lives can bear witness. Contemporary culture says we can be independent; that through a few additional acquisitions, happiness and completeness can be ours.

Yet all the acquisition in the world cannot add much meaning and value unless they enhance our core values, touch the depths of our hearts, and increase the extensity of our virtue. Wisdom is mature integration of appropriate knowledge; a seasoned ability to filter the inessential from the essential. To know when to be generous and when to be firm – that is wisdom. To be kind, gentle and good – that is wisdom. To know your place before God and with others – that is wisdom. Learn to love others – that is wisdom.

These things may not seem like much to you now. But when you are wise, you will see these things are pretty well all that matter. When that wisdom grasps you, and you can let it grow within you, trust me - you will know that you are blessed as a beneficiary. And in so doing you will surely become a natural benefactor to others, without ever even intending it. Let wisdom build a house in you, so others may be drawn to your virtues and generosity. Trust me - you will make a world of difference. Literally.

So I am back to one, simple, three-letter word that beckons us. It is the only word you ever need with God; and yet we pass by it daily, without a second thought. The word means so little, yet so much. It is the first word you need in your dictionary if you are even to become a very minor saint.

That word is 'Yes'. 'Yes' to God. 'Yes' to kindness. 'Yes' to gentleness. 'Yes' to being in compassionate solidarity with those who are far more broken than you – as Jesus was with so many. As Hugh was with those who needed protecting, caring for, educating and healing through his Benedictine and Carthusian Orders which he did so much to encourage and support. Today is about our 'yes' to the same calling. 'Yes' to Jesus. 'Yes' to being one warm, bright, shining spark of goodness in this, our dark, cold world. 'Yes' to truth and love. There can be no greater 'amen' than this. So, God bless Saint Hugh. And may God bless you today too, as we follow the saints in faith, and hope and love. **Amen.**