

CIVIC MASS HOMILY 22 NOVEMBER 2020

In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.

Year by year the Cathedral parish looks forward to celebrating the Civic Mass here at St Chad's. Some of the children and staff from St Chad's School would normally be here, reminding us of the important role they play in the local community in Newtown. Alongside other young people attending with their family, the Cathedral congregation usually includes students who are active in the Catholic Chaplaincy at nearby Aston University.

The welcome presence of our young people always reminds us of the youthful character of our city, with one of the highest percentages of young people in the country. This year we very much miss them and hope that they are still able to be with us online. In our liturgical calendar, as well as being the Feast of Christ the King, today is also designated as Youth Sunday within the Catholic Church.

Our young people play a vital part in living out their faith by witnessing to others in their words and deeds – reflecting the message of today's Gospel, that our lives can be judged by the way we treat other people. This morning we are going to hear some messages and testimonies from four young people who are active in the life of the Church.

The Civic Mass is an important opportunity to pray for God's blessing upon our city. This year, because of the coronavirus pandemic, we are more conscious than ever of the people who serve us and on whose dedication and skills we depend.

Today we pray for all those who are currently ill at home or in hospital because of Covid-19 – and also for those who are caring for them – their own families and friends and all the healthcare professionals, ancillary staff and carers in our hospitals, nursing homes and hospices. They deserve our prayers as they give of their best to assist all those who are most in need at this difficult and unsettling time.

I'm very conscious that the Catholic community finds itself at home alongside the other Christian churches and the other faith communities that help to form the character of Birmingham. I am especially grateful for the friendship we enjoy with St Philip's Cathedral – and I recall that last year our two choirs came together to sing in a joint act of worship for the first time. I am grateful that Dean Matt Thomson is joining us online today and I wish him and the Cathedral Chapter and community every blessing for their work of evangelisation in the midst of the city.

People of faith are fully engaged in every dimension of our city's life. They belong to supportive faith communities that are ready to reach out to meet the needs of others. Today we pray for the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Christian congregations for whom the city of Birmingham is both our home and the setting in which we continue to enjoy the precious freedom to worship God and witness to our different though not competing beliefs.

It is a blessing for us that every year on this occasion the regular worshippers in the Cathedral can welcome and be united with many of those who represent the civic, judicial, diplomatic, academic, cultural and commercial life of the city. It is usually a very colourful event – and we have missed all our guests this year.

We are just a week away from Advent – the season when we look forward to the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time – as well as looking forward to celebrating his birth at Christmas. We keep this Sunday as the Feast of Christ the King. The Church invites us to reflect on the coming of God's Kingdom at the end of time - but Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats encourages us not to wait until it is too late but to assess the pattern and priorities of our lives here and now.

St Matthew's Gospel refers to Jesus as the *Son of Man*. This emphasises the bond between Jesus Christ and the whole of humanity and it enables us to put the widest interpretation on his words: *In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me*. We are shown very clearly the standard by which we are going to be measured when our life is complete. But we are also able to judge ourselves today by the rule of love.

We know from experience that those who do a great deal of good in our society are often unconscious of their achievements. So it is inspiring and gratifying when our civic leaders and institutions are able to recognise their good deeds. Acts of kindness and untiring service have been especially important during the current coronavirus pandemic.

Despite the popular blame that is sometimes indiscriminately attached to the lifestyle of young people, during the current pandemic we can point to many examples of selfless concern that have motivated young people to witness and to serve. I am particularly grateful for the witness of the students and staff at Newman University Birmingham and I thank the Vice Chancellor, Professor Jackie Dunne and everyone at Newman. We can learn much from their passionate concern for justice, for the integrity of creation and environmental issues, for peace in the world.

While aware of many of the challenges that we face, we also recognise the blessing of being able to celebrate our rich diversity as citizens of Birmingham and to live in peace with one another. We cherish the liberties that our civic life guarantees. Today we also remember those who do not enjoy the freedoms that we can so easily take for granted.

Just a year ago our city was represented by the Lord Mayor, Councillor Mohammed Azim, at the Canonisation of Saint John Henry Newman in Rome. Cardinal Newman believed that the image of God could be seen in every human being. He spoke of a *yearning of our nature* leading us to *a noble faith in what we cannot see... There is a voice within us, which assures us that there is something higher than earth.*

That inner voice can help us to live lives of service, so that we may one day hear the words of Jesus Christ addressed to each one of us: *Come, you whom my Father has blessed... In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.*