

Reception of a relic of St Chad

Lichfield Cathedral, 8th November, 2022

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Archbishop Bernard and to the Archdiocese of Birmingham for this wonderful gift of a relic of the mortal remains of our first bishop. It is a great sign of the friendship between our two communities, as together we seek to follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad, and that is a friendship which also links us with people of other Christian traditions today; this is a heartfelt celebration of ecumenical trust and partnership.

The language of relics does not come naturally to many Anglicans, and veneration of them does not usually form part of our spiritual practice; but we do use the language and practice of memory and remembering, which is particularly poignant for us around this time of year. It was just over five years ago that the late and much-loved Dean of St Chad's Cathedral, Fr Gerry Breen (who was also an ecumenical canon of this Cathedral) spoke to a large pilgrimage marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Fr Gerry talked about the importance of remembering those whom we love and honour, and how natural it is for us to have – for example – a photograph of a loved one, or one of their precious belongings, as a keepsake to aid memory.

How much more, then, to treasure a part of their mortal remains, as we are doing today. And our memories on an occasion like this have to be mixed – we call to mind with gladness and thanksgiving Chad, saint of the universal and undivided church of Jesus Christ, and we call to mind in shame and penitence the bitter divisions which have separated us from one another and so grievously wounded the credibility of the message which Chad proclaimed to us all. Today, 8th November, as we recall the saints and martyrs on all sides of the Reformation era, we pray fervently for the healing of Christ's shattered church.

The memory we celebrate today not only causes us to look backwards; it also directs us to the present and points us to the future. The saint whose mortal remains we honour today is not just any old body; we are replacing here in Lichfield one who was first buried and venerated here because he was the first to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to this part of England. To the divided, war-torn and violent pagan kingdom of Mercia, Chad came from the bitter enemy, Northumbria. He came armed with peace and humility, a loving concern for the well-being of every soul, and an unshakeable confidence in the hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ begins. For three brief years he walked through the farmsteads, villages and settlements of Mercia, meeting and greeting all he met in the name of the Lord and sharing with them the good news that sets us free.

In our present, in our own time, it seems that we are really back at the beginning where Chad was. Our society, like that of seventh century England, is fearful, divided and sometimes despairing. Our task is Chad's task all over again: to evangelise our twenty-first century Mercia with the gospel of peace and hope, of forgiveness and healing for men, women and children in their brokenness and lostness, of a common good in which all can flourish and grow together. It is my prayer today that all who visit this shrine, to celebrate the memory of St Chad, will be inspired to share again his zeal in bringing the gospel to the West Midlands.

Our remembering of Chad, and particularly our grateful reception of this precious relic of his mortal body, must also point us to the future. For us Christians, life is lived under the horizon of a hope which has been opened up to us in the raising of Jesus on the third day, and which will be fulfilled in us when God raises us in glory with Christ. Last Sunday, the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (which the Church of England also chooses to call the 3rd Sunday before Advent) the eucharistic readings in our Common Lectionary gave us that wonderful passage in Luke 20 where the Lord proclaims the reality of God's new life against the cavilling of the Sadducees. In a striking phrase found only in Luke, Jesus declares that in the age to come we will be 'children of the resurrection.' It is that promise to which we cling in honouring the mortal remains of our brother Chad.

Those mortal remains are not just bits of bone or flesh – not Chad’s, nor the remains of any whom we have loved. They are the relics and traces of the mortal bodies in and through which there once lived the sons and daughters of God, the brothers and sisters of Christ, and with Christ those bodies will be raised one day to fulness of life. Sown in mortality, corruptible, they will be raised in immortality, glorious. It is that sure and firm hope of resurrection which we proclaim today.

So it is right that a part of Chad’s mortal remains should be brought back here to the place where they once were laid. It is good that today we join together not only as Anglicans and Roman Catholics but as brothers and sisters of other churches too. We all have much to learn from one another, and I have been learning much recently from the Moravian tradition in particular. It is from the early Moravians that we have the English phrase ‘God’s acre’ for a graveyard, for they saw it as a field in which the dead bodies of the saints would be planted like seeds until the glorious harvest of the resurrection. We are not in a graveyard, but the same principle applies: the resting of mortal remains here points forwards to the coming kingdom of Christ. The founder of the Moravians, Count Nikolaus Zinzendorf, once said: ‘To lie in the tomb is a liturgical act.’ As we share this liturgy together as Christian friends, may God’s grace remake us to go out in humility and hope proclaiming the kingdom, as Chad did 1350 years ago.