

Ecumenical Evening Prayer – Translation of a Relic of St Chad Lichfield Cathedral - 8 November 2022

It is with a great sense of joy and historical purpose that we come together for this ecumenical celebration of Evening Prayer in Lichfield Cathedral today. Under our shared patronage of St Chad, the bonds of faith and affection that exist between our two dioceses and their respective cathedrals are deepened and set on a new trajectory.

As Roman Catholic Archbishop, linked through communion with the See of Rome with the ancient and enduring Christian community founded by St Chad, it is a privilege and a joy to enter into this moment of prayer and the sharing of gifts at the side of my colleague and friend, Bishop Michael Ipgrave, the successor of St Chad in the See of Lichfield.

In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* the Venerable Bede recounts the story of St Chad's appointment by Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury to oversee the spiritual care of the people of Mercia. According to his custom, St Chad preferred to walk when evangelizing and going about his pastoral duties.

But knowing the extent of the territory Chad had to cover, Archbishop Theodore proposed that he should travel on horseback. When Chad showed signs of hesitation, Bede tells us that the archbishop lifted Chad onto a horse with his own hands, since he knew him to be a man of simplicity, holiness, and obedience, to enable him to travel more freely and effectively. (St Chad, must have been quite light, too!)

Well, you will be pleased to know that the relic of St Chad, which has been brought today on behalf of the Roman Catholic community and accompanied by the Canons of the Metropolitan Chapter of St Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham, has returned to Lichfield not with hesitation, but with alacrity and gratitude. We recognise the impact of his holiness of life and the affection that St Chad inspires within both our traditions, knowing that his relic will become a focus for prayer in this beautiful restored shrine, inspired by his witness and strengthened by his prayers interceding for our two diocesan families.

Today's celebration is the fruit of a lengthy conversation and it reflects the ecumenical journey that we have travelled together in growing

respect and understanding for each other's history and traditions. Our experience of the past must always help us to understand our present and to shape what lies ahead of us.

You will know that the veneration of relics and their enclosure in the altars of Catholic churches comes from the earliest days of the Church, as Christians sought to recall and celebrate the example of faith of the early martyrs. The tradition of venerating the relics of saints encourages us to reflect on their lives as signposts of faith, always leading us toward a deeper encounter with Our Lord through the experience of His love and mercy. As St Chad bears witness, each saint offers a unique insight into a life lived in virtue and in faithfulness to God's grace. The saints testify to the opening words of today's reading from Ecclesiasticus, urging us to perform our tasks with humility so that we will be loved by those whom God accepts.

Perhaps St Chad's own preference for traveling on foot teaches us something else today. Walking is the way of the pilgrim and it gave St Chad time to consider and to reflect on what he saw as he met people along the way. (He must also have been very familiar with the strong Staffordshire wind which we encountered today as we walked from St Chad's Well towards the Cathedral!) Perhaps St Chad recalled St Luke's account of the road to Emmaus as the risen Jesus walked unrecognised with the two disciples before they saw him in the breaking of bread. Such journeys allow the time for deeper conversations, listening to one another and growing in friendship through accompaniment.

The veneration of relics has been a cause of division in our shared history - but today is a moment that draws us together as we seek to reflect on St Chad's life. In this fragment of bone which has been cherished through the centuries in this Cathedral and across the Midlands, we witness a final homecoming, ensuring that Lichfield Cathedral will continue to be a place of encounter and friendship between Anglicans and Roman Catholics and for all those who are baptised in Christ.

I pray that today will enable us to grow our life together as disciples of Christ, supported and sustained in this shared endeavour through the prayers of St Chad. May this relic be a symbol of our friendship and the unity in faith in Christ which we already enjoy – and may it always foster the fullness of unity for which Jesus prayed: *that we might all be one.*