

HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL OF FR LEO CHAMBERLAIN

6 DECEMBER 2019

On behalf of Fr Abbot and of the monastic community I would like to welcome you all to this funeral Mass for Fr Leo. I welcome Richard his brother, Sally his sister, his family who know him as George, friends from the course of his life and those who have known him here or elsewhere in his various roles in his monastic life. Fr Leo worked for forty years in the school, for the last eleven years as Headmaster. He was Master of St Benet's in Oxford for three years and parish priest of Easingwold for ten years up to 2018. In recognition of his achievements he was appointed Cathedral Prior of Gloucester by the Abbot President of the English Benedictine Congregation in 2008. Among these achievements are those already mentioned, but also his work with and for Christians in Eastern Europe, of which a particular summit was his organisation of the international Ampleforth Conference on Believers, Society and State in Central and Eastern Europe. He was a man of strong and deep loyalties: Ampleforth and its works, University College Oxford, his friends, the Catholic Church and its priesthood. Our most important task, as always in a Christian funeral, is for us to pray for him in this Mass, for the forgiveness of his sins and for his welcome into the Kingdom of Heaven.

With what hope do we come before God? In the words of today's Gospel we come before God in the hope of the one who says to us: 'Whoever listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life' for 'the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live'.

There are similar words in our first reading, from the book of Job, 'After my awaking my avenger' in other translations, redeemer or saviour, 'will set me close to him, and from my flesh I shall look on God. He whom I shall see, will take my part; these eyes will gaze on him'.

Today we remember remarkable achievements and a staunch, stalwart character at work in these achievements and more than a character a staunch and stalwart faith, which suggested these readings: 'This I know' and 'the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God'. This is a homily, not a eulogy and there will be another place for obituary, for a detailed narrative of a life lived indomitably in the service of God, of the priesthood and of Ampleforth.

But let this be said and in gratitude to God for him. George Chamberlain was aptly given the monastic name of 'Leo', for he was indeed a lionheart. A lion of faith and of action, not deterred. He got things done: at the beginning, for example, a golf course at Gilling and, at the end, a refurbished church at Easingwold. And in between these 'book-ends' a renewed school, brought to heel and enabled to flourish in the 1990s and with the admission of girls. He was not a Brexiteer, but he did get things done, 'run down the goose' being a favourite saying.

Indeed there were central achievements in Ampleforth and Oxford, not always without some cost to himself and others who could cry out with the Psalmist 'Save me from the lion's mouth, my poor life from the wild bulls' horns'. But I return to the point that his faith always seemed unshakeable and for some his friendship unconditional, who have reason to be grateful to him. He saw in strong distinctions of black and white and he had great courage. He was a good person to succeed when I became Headmaster. And he had a strong sense for the way in which life is a battle, a *contra mundum* sense. I know that my Avenger lives.

He could be very kind and sympathetic, given the reputation that at times went before him, and this latter reputation hurt him in some of its consequences. He brooded over Ampleforth's recent troubles in safeguarding and felt his own role misrepresented and misunderstood. But if you seek his monument, look around you. There is no doubt, it seems to me, but that the continued existence of the school in the 1990s and the major programme of renewal owes much to him: a key leader for a key time.

There is a hard saying about grace in the Rule of St Benedict, very opposed to the modern mentality which tends to see things the opposite way round that if you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge' (4:41).

Fr Leo makes this point himself in his final homily as Headmaster to school leavers. It is printed after his substantial final Exhibition speech in the Ampleforth Journal for 2003. He speaks of the end of a school career and a going forth into the world, but I think it can be well applied to the end of his life in the monastic infirmary and his going forth to God.

'We are celebrating tonight the end of your school education at Ampleforth, but I would like you to think more of beginnings than ends'. He then quotes from the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, 'Look I am making all things new'. He ended

the homily thus: 'When we meet or hear about the failings of the Church, it helps to remember that Christians have always been sinners. St Peter and all the earliest Christians knew that. That was why for them, as for us, the vision of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven is such an assurance of hope justified. Our good purposes are given fullest meaning in faith and hope and love of God in the Church. The new Jerusalem is the Church as it will be when all things reach their ending, all good purposes are fulfilled, and all things are made new.'

Fr Gabriel Everitt, OSB

Prior Administrator