

Long ago, back on the last day of 225 a baby was born near Valencia, in Italy – his name was Laurence. Laurence lived in a strange time for Christians, the early Church was being persecuted and the Roman authorities were executing many on the charge of 'hatred for the human race'.

By the time Laurence was 33, in 258, he was a Deacon, and with many others supported the poor and vulnerable within their community. In 258 Emperor Valerian had issued an edict to the Roman Senate that all the Christian clergy-bishops, priests and deacons-were to be arrested and executed; Lawrence was amongst them.

The Bishop of Rome, Sixtus, was amongst the first to be executed, when Laurence (who had responsibility for all the church's good) heard this he sold all his property and began distributing the money amongst the poor and needy.

When Valerian heard the news of this action, he wanted the wealth for himself, he offered Deacon Lawrence a deal - if he would show him where the Church's great gold and silver were located, he would issue an order of clemency, sparing his life so that he could continue his work.

For three days, Deacon Lawrence went throughout the city and invited all the beloved poor, those with disabilities, and misfortunate to come together. They were being supported by a thriving early Christian community who understood the Gospel imperative to recognize Jesus in the poor.

When Valerian arrived, the Lawrence presented him with the true gold and silver of the Church, the poor! The emperor was filled with rage! Beheading was not enough for this. He ordered Lawrence to be burned alive, in public, on a griddle. Witnesses recorded the public martyrdom. The deacon cheerfully offered himself to God and it is recorded that he even joked with his executioners!

The tradition records massive conversions to the Christian faith as a result of the holy life and death of Laurence who understood the true heart of his vocation – to care for others. It is said that all of Rome became Christian as a result of the faithful life, and the death, of this one humble deacon. He was buried in a cemetery on the Via Tiburtina. On that spot, Constantine would later build a Basilica.

Today on this special Sunday in August we celebrate this Saint who is an example to us. While the parish of St Laurence became part of Christ Church a number of years ago, the example of the saint and martyr still inspires us in our actions.

The readings which are set by the church for St Laurence, are also quite inspirational. Firstly we hear the opening section from the Prophet Ezekiel; which describes Ezekiel's vision which leads to his following prophecy. This was a very special experience for Ezekiel. He felt the power of God. He saw the special angels called cherubim. He saw God's throne. He even saw an

impression of God's glory. And then God spoke to Ezekiel. While our modern sensitivities may make us wary of what Ezekiel describes; in context Ezekiel is explaining a real encounter with God. An encounter that transformed his life and led him to live as a prophet.

It was Laurence's encounter with God, and his desire to live out the teachings of Christ that gave him the courage to face Valerian. Laurence's life had been transformed and he wanted others to have the same experience. I wonder if we can call to mind similar encounters with God in our own faith.

The second reading from the Corinthians, may feel equally strange to us, but again Paul is addressing a particular context. In the late-40s A.D., a famine swept across Judea, and Christians in Jerusalem were in need. The leaders of the Jerusalem church, James, Cephas, and John requested Paul "to remember the poor". Paul responded by encouraging Christians to contribute to an offering to provide relief for Jerusalem Christians. In this section of Corinthians, Paul continues to emphasize the offering for the Jerusalem church, encouraging the Corinthian Christians to "arrange ahead of time the generous gift that you promised before" (9:5). Through the images in his passage Paul is trying to counter objections from the Corinthian Christians that they can't afford to contribute generously. He says that, if they give generously, they can expect to receive generous blessings in return. Paul is drawing on their experience of God, which transformed their lives and reminding them to act with generosity.

Just as Valerian did not understand that wealth was to be found in the value of human life, not in silver or gold – so the Corinthians needed to be reminded that God had provided generously and they needed to respond to the need of their fellow Christians.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading. We rarely hear this part of Matthew's Gospel on a Sunday morning, though we will be familiar with the passages round about it. In this exert, for the second time Jesus warns his disciples about what is to come: his suffering, death and resurrection. Once again the word 'delivered' or 'handed over' is used. It is a kind of refrain running right through the Gospel and applied to John the Baptist, to Jesus, to the disciples and the giving of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

We are told that the disciples are overwhelmed with grief over what Jesus says. Whether that is purely out of sorrow for Jesus or whether it represents their disillusionment, is hard to say. This was not the kind of end they were expecting to the coming of the Messiah. I suspect this was true to the clerics of Rome. Had they expected their faith would lead to death?

There is an honesty in this passage about the grief that followers of Christ encounter, regardless of the source of that grief. Laurence, like disciples before and after him, will have also have had this experience.

The second part of today's Gospel reading is a peculiar scene, only to be found in Matthew. The collectors of the Temple tax want to know whether Jesus pays it or not. Peter assures them he does but the following phrases seem to indicate otherwise—though Jesus does ensure payment is made.

I think this is a curious passage to reflect on in light of Laurence. On the one hand, Laurence does not pay the tax to the Emperor, but then the request of the Emperor is unjust and would appear to us to be theft, or the spoils of war. Laurence defies the request. But he also challenges the system, challenges the Emperor to see that life, and the life of those who are most vulnerable are in fact the most valuable thing we can have.

We are invited to reflect on Laurence in light of these three images:

1. A powerful encounter with God which changes the direction of Ezekiel's life.
2. Paul's reminder to the Corinthians, to share what they have with those who are suffering because of the famine
3. And Jesus who prepares the disciples for his death, while reminding the disciples that they are part of a system which needs to be changed.

As we reflect on the example of one our patrons' today. A patron who calls us to see the most vulnerable as the most precious. We might be inspired also by these three vignettes.

God invites us to encounter the fullness of all God has to offer. This is not just an inspiring vision; though they will hold us in times when our faith struggles – but in the reminder to support those who are in need, especially those in our community. But most importantly Jesus promises Peter, that even in the light of his approaching death they are not tied to the constraints of the world, but rather they are free.

This is the promise of our faith. The encounter and embrace of Jesus love; even in great times of trouble. This is the promise which St Laurence shared and lived out in his actions in Rome, and it is the promise which should inspire us today.

Today as we share in this Eucharist together, let us have the courage to encounter God who leads us to action and hope. Amen.