

Wednesday 13 May 2020

Homily by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Loving Father, may my thoughts, may my actions and, particularly at this time, may my words be inspired by your love. Amen.

Our Gospel reading this morning - and the verses that proceed it in John, the bit where Jesus says: *'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you'* (you meaning everyone), which some of you will have heard Alan read in our service on Sunday - these are passages that have always inspired me.

Let me tell you a story. After I left college, I worked for a couple of years as a hospital porter in the Old Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. This was not the new John Radcliffe Hospital that you see these days up on the hill in Headington, Oxford, but was an old Baroque building in the centre of town. It had 650 beds, over 30 wards, several operating theatres and a busy Accident and Emergency Service Department that operated 24 hours a day.

After working there for a year, I was promoted and became a Senior Porter. This meant, at the age of 22, I was managing a shift of up to 40 porters, delegating jobs and, basically, telling men (yes, it was all men in those days), twice my age what to do. I got by with an enthusiasm for the job; a strict code of fairness - no favouritism for who got which job - and a lot of humour. Most of the porters on my watch seemed to respect this and I enjoyed the job.

The porters were a mixed bunch. Some were ex-production-line workers from the car factory at Cowley; some were young guys not long out of school, others were ex-students from Oxford University. It was a diverse crowd but we all got along pretty well.

I could tell you a lot of stories from those days. For me, I think of it as a time when my real education began; when I learnt about the real world and real people, who had backgrounds and lives different from my own.

One porter made a big impression on me and I think about him still. His surname was Stiles and so, because we all had nicknames, he was called Nobby, after the World Cup-winning English footballer, Nobby Stiles.

He was in his late 50s; he generally kept himself to himself, could be rather withdrawn at times, as if his mind was in another place. But, underneath his serious exterior and his 'don't-mess-with-me' confidence, he had a quiet sense of humour. I liked him and he was a good worker to have on your shift.

Nobby and I were working the night shift together one night, when we got a call to say that there was a bit of trouble in A&E. This happened occasionally.

I took the call because I was the Senior Porter and I said to Nobby: *Hey Nobby, there's a fight in Accident Service; go and sort it out, will you.*

Nobby looked at me and said: *No... sort it out yourself.*

I was surprised, but Nobby had that look in his eyes that said, *Don't argue, I'm not going.*

So I went round to Accident Service and sorted out the fight. I know that sounds impressive - mild-mannered Forbes Mutch sorts out a fist fight. But, the truth is, I happened to know both guys involved from a pub in town and I simply said: *Joe, Harry... how are you? Listen, fellers, don't fight here, you're making my life*

difficult. If you want to fight, go outside. And they looked at me and said: *Oh, hello Forbsie, didn't know you worked here.* And they stopped fighting. I think they were relieved to have an excuse.

I went back to the Porters' Lodge and told Nobby it was all sorted.

He looked at me and said very quietly: *Sorry, mate. Listen, I used to be in the Parachute Regiment. I fought in Germany at the end of the War and then in Korea. I was taught how to kill a man. If I get into a fight, I don't know what I'd do. I avoid trouble. I know you didn't want to go to A&E tonight but, look, if it happens again and you get scared, take this...*

And he held out his hand and slipped something into mine. It was a rough wooden cross, a crude crucifix. *Something like this has always saved my life,* said Nobby. *The War, Korea... I always carried it. If you believe God will protect you, He will.*

At that time, my faith was coming and going. I wasn't sure what I believed. But I thought: you know what, if someone like Nobby, someone who has been taught to fight and kill and has come to terms with who he is, if he is accepted by God; if there's a room in God's house for Nobby, there must be a place for me, too.

I went home after that shift, it was 6.00 o'clock in the morning and I put on a David Bowie record - Heroes, I think it was - and, like it says in Psalm 98 (thank you, Wendy, for reading that) I

Broke forth into joyous song and sang praises.

I sang praises to the Lord.

After I left Oxford a year later, I went travelling and lost touch with everyone I had worked with at the Radcliffe Infirmary and I never knew what happened to Nobby. But I'm grateful to this day for his

closet Christianity and how it helped me then. There's a room for everyone in God's house.

Amen

