

ANNIVERSARY MASS FOR CARDINAL HUME

Homily by Abbot Robert Igo OSB



20 June 2023

At the church of the Holy Name, Jesmond, Newcastle, there was in the sacristy a suitcase, that belonged to Cardinal Hume. He would from time to time collect this suitcase so that he could celebrate Mass with his mother who lived in the parish. The newly appointed assistant priest had been made aware of the presence of this suitcase. So, when unexpectedly he found the Cardinal on the doorstep he knew instantly the purpose of the visit. They spent time chatting and the young priest remarked: *“I’ve visited your mother, Lady Hume on several occasions, but she always asks at the end of the visit who I am?”* *“Don’t take it personally”*, Cardinal Hume responded quickly, *“she always asks who I am at the end of each visit also, it keeps me in my place!”*

That self-effacing humility was a hallmark of Cardinal Basil and I mention it at the outset because I do not want you to be disappointed in case you think that this homily is going to be a complete eulogy to him, it would in fact be the very last thing that he would want. His life as monk, abbot and as Cardinal Archbishop was rooted in one single desire, to point each person he met to the living presence of Jesus Christ. Or as St Paul said in the first reading: *‘to bring this work of mercy to the same point of success among you.’* He desired to be, what every Christian is called to be, certainly what St Alban whose memoria we celebrate today was, a window through which others could experience the tenderness of God. This is why he liked so much these words of St John Paul II addressed to a Symposium of the European Bishops’ Conference on October 11th, 1985, a year before this Centre was founded. St John Paul said:

“We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who know in depth the hearts of the men of today, who participate in their joys and hopes, concerns and sorrows, and at the same time are persons in love with God.”

If you take nothing away from this celebration this evening, then please take that conviction.: ‘heralds of the Gospel’, ‘experts in humanity’ people in love with God.

It was this great passion for God that led Cardinal Hume to have a great passion for humanity, to stand with others in their joys and sorrows. As a son of St Benedict, he was rooted in the desire for people to be treated with great respect because he knew that unless they felt safe and respected, they could not flourish or find meaning and purpose.

He had learnt from his personal encounter with Jesus, from his reading of the Word of God that each person has an inherent dignity, not because of their family background or what they have achieved – their status - but because they carried the image and likeness of God within them. Steeped in the Rule of St Benedict he lived the invitation to *‘listen with the ear of the heart’* – a respectful listening - that embraced people where they were on their journey so as to take them on a journey into God’s bigger dream.

St Alban, the martyr we honour today, died not because he encountered an inspiring philosophy or an ideology, but because he encountered the person of Jesus who had made a radical difference to the way he saw life and the choices he wanted to live by. Faith was not a set of doctrines to be learnt but a relationship that transformed every aspect of his life, something worth dying for. All this occurred because he encountered a priest for whom faith was alive.

Cardinal Hume, like the priest who inspired St Alban had that quality of being able to welcome people and help them to feel ‘seen’, included, recognised and this came from his Benedictine spirituality of hospitality, a making space for God, that meant he had the capacity to have space for others. Hence seeing others potential and helping them to recognise it was a natural and concrete expression of his deep appreciation of being part of a huge community of faith, working and walking together. These are the values that he tried to pass on to this Centre that bears his name.

In the harsh and individualistic environment of our world today and in the United Kingdom in particular, these values of the Gospel are even more needed. For twenty-five years I lived outside of England, in Zimbabwe, among people who often struggled to find sufficient food, school fees to educate their children, or adequate medical help. Yet despite this I lived among people who never lost faith in God and who always had time for each other and who would share the little they had. I think of a young boy who came to our monastery looking for food. I gave him some bread

and milk while I went to find something he could take away. I came back and the milk had been drunk but the bread uneaten. “*Do you not like the bread*”, I said. “*Yes, but I want to share it with the others at home.*”

Celebrating this Mass in honour of the St Alban and in remembrance of Cardinal Hume will have little effect or meaning, it will be yet another ‘event’ in a busy calendar, unless the Gospel values, the person of Jesus, that so transformed their lives has a lasting legacy in ours. This Centre that bears Cardinal Hume’s name is such a beacon of hope, but wouldn’t it be wonderful if this Centre and its mission was no longer necessary because we had embedded in our society the crucially important values of:

- creating safe spaces in family and neighbourhoods throughout our country. Places of respectful listening.
- if we could all approach others recognising the inherent value of each human life. Celebrating difference, rather than highlighting prejudice.
- live the spirit of welcome, encouragement and inclusivity. If we could learn the art of working together and walking together so that we transform our nation.

Ultimately, we are not here to put Cardinal Hume on a pedestal but to commit ourselves to what under pinned his life and ministry. To follow the example of our martyr saint. To be energetic in announcing through word and gesture the Gospel of Joy, compassion, and hope. To be a window through which others may see and encounter the living presence of God. To pass on the truth that life is worth living, because God has revealed that we are held always in love and imbued with a dignity and destiny that is far greater than we could ever think of creating. Here is a gospel our nation needs to hear and experience. We need to be advocates of a gospel of genuine love and respect, not because it a good thing to do, but because every living person is a sacrament of the presence of God. Because we believe that to encounter another person is to encounter the God of the universe.

Thank you for the invitation to join you in this Mass. My prayer is that we truly will become what we are celebrating and that each one here will commit to being agents of transformation in whatever sphere of life we find ourselves. Agents, as CS Lewis once said, ‘agents of sabotage’, living heralds of the Gospel who know the hearts of the men and women of today, who participate in their joys and hopes, concerns and sorrows, and at the same time are missionary disciples in love with God. Then we will change our families, our neighbourhoods, our country, and our world.

Let me conclude with some words that St Alban and Cardinal Hume would fully endorse because they lived and believed this truth. Pope Francis wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Gaudium*: n265:

We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love.

Friends today we are invited to be agents of this infinite love.