

Festival of the Society for the Maintenance of the Faith

St Magnus the Martyr, London Bridge, 18 June 2022

Sermon by the Rt Revd Norman Banks, Bishop of Richborough

From S. John's Gospel: 'Simon Peter answered him: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life".'

A while ago I read in the *Tablet* that the Portuguese Government has recently passed a law in order to make their language less complicated. You can appreciate the sentiment, since by all accounts Portuguese is a very difficult language to master and speak well. So, to simplify the language they have abolished all silent letters in words. The English equivalent would be to decide that 'wrong' would lose its silent W and be spelt 'rong'. All those Ps before S and N in such words derived from the Greek as 'psychiatrist' and 'pneumatic' would also go, and so on. It is a long list, and there is a pressure group in our own country trying to do the same as has happened in Portugal and Germany. The argument is that it would be much easier for children to spell, and we would be simply catch up with what is happening anyway with current computer speak and texting.

I would, however, imagine most of us here would resist such a move. Not because we are necessarily fogies, but because of our sadness at such an impoverishment of our language. For each silent letter has story to tell, reminding us of the Greek, Roman and Anglo Saxon worlds from which our culture and society has sprung.

But the bias towards superficial simplification in every aspect of our lives is endemic. The dumbing down of just about everything is mirrored by the number of people who seem largely to exist in the virtual reality and ultimate aridity of television soaps and computer games.

That self-same pressure is also on the Church, and, although we need to accommodate new ways to evangelize and communicate the faith, we must also recognize the damage and danger of over-simplification.

In no area of Christian life is this more crucial than in our Eucharistic celebrations. To iron out the rich, rich nuances, the levels and depths of meaning to be found in our liturgy, in the name of increased accessibility and availability is counterproductive.

Ultimately, it will be a fruitless enterprise. For we know that we are about mystery. What we are about in Church is the expressing of the inexpressible. Our liturgical drama echoes the worship of heaven. The Sacraments we celebrate are far more heavenly than earthly. The bread and the wine we share with angels as well as with one other.

The Society for the Maintenance of the Faith and the other catholic societies who hold patronage do so for this very reason. Ours are not 'resource churches', nor are they 'ecclesiastical hubs' or simply centres for community activities. They are places set aside, hallowed and consecrated, for the worship of God in Trinity and the celebration of the sacraments. Our task gets ever harder in the current climate, but by that very fact ever more crucial for the spiritual good health of our people.

Jesus tells us, 'The bread come down from heaven is not like the bread our ancestors ate: To eat this bread is to live for ever.' In our language much is communicated and expressed in the silence of those unvoiced, silent letters. Our liturgy too is filled with unvoiced and silent truth. Our privilege surely, especially in the catholic tradition of the Church, in our worship and our prayer, is no less than in the tuning in, the celebrating and in the sharing in the harmonies of heaven.

Let us never forget that as catholic Christians we live on nothing less than 'everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord.'