

**Visit of the Relics of Bl. Louis & Zélie Martin
Church of St Theresa of the Child Jesus, Totton**

Homily

I had a meal recently with a group of my brother priests. There were about eight of us gathered for no other reason other than it was good to be together. Over the meal we swapped stories and anecdotes and talked of the joy we feel in being priests. At one point we were talking of how words play an important part in the exercise of our priesthood and this led to the question: what words used in our priestly ministry did we know off by heart? We all knew the words of absolution to be used by a priest in hearing a confession – isn't that reassuring? We also knew off by heart the words of institution by which the bread and wine are become the body and blood of Christ. And we all knew that it is not permitted for a priest to change those words in any way since in speaking them he acts in the person of Christ.

Most of us sat at table a few weeks ago added that a third set of words we know off by heart are those to be spoken at a wedding. I love weddings, which is just as well because being the parish priest of St John's Cathedral, Portsmouth I get to officiate at lots of them. So I have had plenty of opportunity to reflect on the words spoken by the bride and groom as they enter into marriage. What power there is in the words which are necessary to exchange consent: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I take thee to be my lawful wedded wife/husband for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish til death do us part. Of all the words used in the exercise of priestly ministry it is these which I invite you to think about this evening.

They are words which have been said by countless men and women over the centuries, among them Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin. This nineteenth century French couple now beatified and soon to be canonised said them at their own wedding which took place in their parish church on 13 July 1858 and at midnight which to us may seem an unusual hour to get married. From the beginning, they placed their love under the protection of God, who, in their union, would they agreed always be "the first served." In their nineteen years of married life they stayed true to their agreement. And through life's joys and sorrows they learned what it meant to be united and faithful to each other and to God.

In the gospel for Mass today Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed that his disciples would be kept true to God; for their sake he consecrated himself so that they would be consecrated in truth (Jn 17). In ways that complimented each other Louis and Zélie Martin show how they succeeded in imitating Christ; in staying true to God and to being consecrated in truth.

For better for worse: they nourished their lives by frequently coming to Mass and too by seeking God's pardon and peace in the confessional. For richer or poorer: running a modest lace and jewellery business they had an income which provided for their own material needs but rather than just enjoying the reward of their labours they stayed attentive to practising the works of mercy. They discreetly helping out needy families and supported those charities whose work they admired. In sickness and in health: in a time of high infant mortality they brought nine children into the world but four of them died at an early age. To love and to cherish: this part of their marriage vows is proved by the growth in holiness of their five surviving daughters, the youngest of whom Therese is arguably among the Catholic Church's most loved of saints.

Their daughter Celine was the last of the five to die and she had the joy of testifying at the Beatification Process of her parents. She declared: "My father was a 'personality'; my mother was a 'personality'; different temperaments, but perfectly well-matched, each one completing, the deficiencies of the other, always corrected by virtue." Inevitably death did part them: Zelig died from breast cancer aged 46 but she and Louis believed they would be reunited in heaven by God whom they had strived to put first.

Of them we may say: they took Jesus as their role model. They would have heard him called the bridegroom of the Church and they would have known that the example of his virtuous personality can correct not only the personality of the Church but too all her members. Often do we neglect what we call the works of mercy – as a Church and individually as her members; we can forget the needy, the sick and the dying, at such times we are to quote the apostle Paul from the first reading at this Mass failing to feed the Church of God (Acts 20). How right Pope Francis has been to invite us to keep towards the end of this year a jubilee year of mercy, in which as a Church we can recommit ourselves to the works of mercy which all too often we can and do leave neglected. The visit of the relics of Blessed Louis and Zelig Martin invites us to be on our guard against such neglect. It also challenges us to turn often to God as they did, relying on his providential will to guide the Church and all her members.

As we welcome the relics of this holy couple to this Diocese, as we seek their prayers for the family of the Church and for our own families and too for the success this October of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, let us seek not to forget that God has pledged himself to us for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in our sickness and in our health, to love us and cherish us now and forever.

DJG, 20 May 2015