

The late Abbot of Ampleforth, not Cardinal Basil Hume but rather the man he looked up to Abbot Herbert Byrne, used, I believe, to give the following spiritual advice to his monks: *Never forget that when you die, somebody, somewhere will be glad....*

Celebrating a Requiem Mass for a king who died over five hundred years ago gives us a chance to say what the Requiem Mass is about. We cannot be so blunt when there is a body in the coffin before us and living, grieving relatives sitting in the pews, no matter what we may know about the person who has died, or how much they may need to be forgiven.

A Requiem Mass is not the celebration of the life of King Richard III. The concept would have been completely alien to him. A Requiem Mass is to pray for a person's soul, to beg that God will have mercy on his sins and welcome him to paradise.

King Richard III left instructions for a college of a hundred priests to say Mass in York Minster for the repose of his soul. He did not anticipate that every day they would come out to the chapel and say "This Mass is to celebrate the life of King Richard III...."! He wanted those Masses so that every day someone would pray for the salvation of his soul and for the souls of other poor sinners.

I remember in the 1980s watching the Funeral of the Empress Zita, the last Empress of Austria Hungary. When her coffin was brought from Vienna Cathedral to the Franciscan Church at the Hofburg the priest knocked on the locked doors. "Who seeks entry?" came the reply from within. "Zita, Empress of Austria, Queen of Hungary, Grand Duchess of Tuscany...." "We know of no such person here." The priest knocked again. "Who seeks entry?" "Zita, Empress of Austria." "We know of no such person here...." Finally after the third time of asking the question was repeated. "Who seeks entrance?" "Zita, a poor sinner....." Finally the doors swung open, a sign that in death we are all poor sinners.

When a poor sinner dies, probably nobody takes much notice. When a King dies, lots of people sit up and take notice. But in death, all are equal. For a thousand years any Catholic who died had these same prayers said over their coffin... The music might have been grander in some cases than in others, the vestments more impressive, the priest more senior. But everyone got the same.

But the more responsibility we have had the more it is true that when we die, somebody somewhere will be glad.

If we have made hard decisions, had to compromise, found ourselves in situations where every possible course of action involves doing something which we know will cause hurt to others, if we have had authority, then we surely know, that when we die, there will be lots of things for which we need forgiveness.

This is true for parents, or bosses, or teachers, or religious superiors and bishops. Anyone who has had responsibility for guiding and governing others and had to make hard decisions which will have caused hurt and may have involved sin. Even the saints lamented this. Pope St Gregory the Great regretted that when he moved from the monastic life to the government of the Universal Church he was obliged to leave behind him his reserved manner of speech and was forced to make compromises with the world. We need to be forgiven. If this is true of people like us how much more true must it be for a man who was also a King.

It would be madness to dwell in this context on the controversy that has surrounded the life and death of King Richard III. Nobody know more than he that when he died, somebody, somewhere would be glad. Henry Tudor for one, and all his dynasty after him.

But the opposite is also true. Some people may be when a person dies, especially if that person held high office and made many enemies. But it is also true that when a public man or woman dies, no

matter how controversial they may have been in life someone, somewhere feels a private grief and a sense of loss. The death of King Richard III was, no doubt, a cause of joy for many. But for many others, and for people in this city, it was a cause of pain.

*King Richard late mercifully reigning upon us was through grete treason of the duc of Northefolk and many othre that turned ayenst hyme, with many othre lordes and nobilles of this north parties, was pitiously slane and murdred to the grete hevynesse of this citie.*

It is said that *de mortuis nihil nisi bonum*. (Of the dead, nothing but what is good....) On that principle it may be useful to look at a few of the reasons why it was that Richard III was so mourned in this place.

Northerners, and York people in particular, were well aware of uncertainty that comes to a society as a result of usurpation. They might be expected to have recoiled in horror at the thought that Richard Duke of Gloucester had taken the throne from the son of his elder brother Edward IV.

The tower of York Minster, completed only a generation or two before, had been built with the money given by pilgrims to the Shrine of Richard Scrope, the Archbishop of York executed on the orders of the usurper king Henry IV. Many thought Scrope was a northern Becket. The usurpation of the throne of Richard II by Henry IV event was the origin of the bloody conflicts of the Wars of the Roses.

Henry IV and the Kings who came after him, both Yorkist and Lancastrian, with the exception of the saintly Henry VI, privileged their own wealth and political power over conscience, the rights of the church and the needs of the poor. They paid little attention to the North - except if Scotland threatened - and they looked for their inspiration in matters political and religious to the secular and pagan writers then gaining currency in renaissance Italy for whom the Church was an outmoded hindrance to their own hunger for power.

The roots of Henry VIII's seizure of the goods, rights and authority of the Church in the 15th Century can be found in piety and actions of the men and women of the 13th and 14th Centuries.

There is plenty of evidence for northern piety - and its political implications - in York and Yorkshire apart from the Minster Tower. The modern statue of Henry VI in the Minster replaced one destroyed by Richard III's brother Edward IV who was alarmed by the devotion of Yorkshire folk to a saintly king; we have the Prick of Conscience window in All Saints' Church in North Street evidence both of the literacy and the holiness of the people. We find writing of numerous mystics like Richard Rolle (venerated as a saint in the calendar of the Use of York) and countless hermitages and monastic foundations whose ruins are with us today.

Henry VI and Richard III are notable exceptions to this. Both, whatever else history may say about them, were notable for personal piety, for promoting the study of theology, and for endowing the church at all levels. Richard III endowed over a hundred churches, chapels and chantries, compared with a paltry few by his brother Edward IV.

Six college in Oxford and Cambridge for northern clergy were founded in the late fifteenth and early 16th Centuries. They were filled with scholars from Yorkshire and Northumberland and in the generations to follow these teachers were the spiritual forebears of men like St John Fisher, a mercer's son from Beverley who went up to Michaelhouse in Cambridge in 1484.

These scholars had their forebears in those who resisted the political worldliness of late Plantagenet England and ended up dying for their faith. The men and women of the Pilgrimage of Grace and the Northern Rising had their forebears among the pious pilgrims who put their pennies in the boxes at the shrine of Richard Scrope whom they believed had died for the rights of the Church above those of the King.

Today we find it hard to imagine that people can be so politically motivated by religion. (We see it, of course, in the Middle East and among Muslim fanatics but we cannot imaginatively grasp how it can be that religious belief can be a driving force for political action. Perhaps that is why we fail to understand the some of the present crises of our own world. In that sense Richard III and the people of his time would have more understanding of our times than we do ourselves...)

The point I am making is that King Richard was loved up here, by men and women of all ranks and abilities, the lowly the scholarly, the clergy, precisely because of his support for the church and of poor, for his evident fairness - in short for them. This may not have been the whole truth, they may not have seen the whole picture, but it was certainly how things appeared to them, and there is evidence for it in the historical record.

This evening we ask no questions, raise no problems, dig up no old controversies. We do not pray for King Richard, Duke of Gloucester, King of England, Lord of the Knights of the Garter. Instead we pray for a man like ourselves, a man loved in this city. We celebrate this Requiem mass for the soul of Richard, a poor sinner.