



The Thirteenth Week of the Year and the Feast of St Oliver Plunkett 1st and 2nd July 2023

Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it”.

This week I visited the Church of St Mary and St Bartholomew in Hampton-in-Arden, to meet the Vicar who is celebrating the marriage of a young couple – one of whom is Catholic – in July. I will be attending at the request of the Catholic Family and joining in prayer for God’s Blessing on their lifelong union. The Church is almost 900 years old so at one time it was Catholic and the Minister was talking enthusiastically of preparations for the celebration of this great milestone. There are so many interesting features of the Church, including an Icon Project with the title “a glimpse of heaven”. The process of creating the Icon is gone into and the accompanying leaflet states: “Through their simple, highly focused abstract style they try to represent the holiness of those who are transfigured by the presence of God. In this way they become windows into the divine presence, and a way in which the Communion of the Saints can become a present reality for those who come to pray and worship”.

For me the outstanding piece was of a modern stained glass window I have called Christ the Light of the World: it shows a majestic Christ reaching out with lighted candle and other human/angel like figures conjoined to Him reaching out to the world with lighted candles too. It sums up for me the words in the Gospel for the 13th Sunday *“Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it”*. One of those who embodies this is St Oliver Plunkett, the last to be martyred in England at Tyburn in London, 1 July 1681. He was Archbishop of Armagh. At Westminster Hall before being sent to death, he is recorded as saying: *“If I were a man that had not good principles, I might easily have saved my life; but I had rather die ten thousand times, than wrongfully take away one farthing of any man’s goods, one day of his liberty, or one minute of his life”*.

His last speech from the gallows at Tyburn (the spot you can still visit today): *“I do heartily forgive them, and also the judges...I also forgive all those who had a hand in bringing me from Ireland to be tried here, where it was morally impossible for me to obtain a fair trial...I ask forgiveness of all those whom I ever offended by thought, word and deed”*.

On a recent Pilgrim visit to Northern Ireland I saw a beautiful sculpture of St Oliver in St Patrick’s Cathedral. The Irish Bishop’s Conference issued a pastoral letter on the occasion of his Canonisation in October 1975 by Pope St Paul VI. It had these words:

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"We ask him today for all the graces we need for ourselves and for our country...We ask that we may be steadfast, courageous and devout, untiring in our work for peace and reconciliation, loyal to the Church and firm in our faith even to death. St Oliver Plunkett pray for us".

Returning to the Icons in St Mary and St Bartholomew, you can see in the life of St Oliver a "window into the Divine" and "a present reality for those who come to pray and worship". His forgiveness of past wrongs continues to be so relevant to the peace process in Ireland, and at the same time a challenge to each one of us as we tend to nurture grievances. He reminds us of the forgiveness that Jesus calls us to in the Gospel: *"anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it"*; choosing life with Christ means that every relationship we have must be understood from a new perspective.

Ferlita in his commentary refers to Deniece Williams a popular rock singer who came out with an album of Gospel songs. One of the songs is "Keep Your Eyes on Jesus". The point of it is that Jesus calls us to go beyond the herd instinct that we're born with. The most obvious example of this today, as we know to our cost, is the street gang, young people who herd together and act out of the collective psychology of the group. This can happen on a national scale too. Jesus in the Gospel addresses the individual: *"Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me"*. Whose psychology, whose values, whose mores, whose morality do we follow? Breaking of tribal consciousness and establishing an individual consciousness is not to be confused with living for oneself. On the contrary, like Christ, as St Paul says in Romans (the Second Reading for the 13th Sunday) *"You too must consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus"*.

May the Holy Eucharist keep us strong in the Faith as it did the people of Ireland in penal times, when St Oliver often celebrated the Eucharist on the Mass rocks in Ireland.

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