

*The following is the homily given by Jenny Sinclair, Founder of Together for the Common Good, for St Martin's Church Ruislip, Middlesex for their Patronal Festival on St Martin's Day, 11 November 2014*

## **You, me, and Martin of Tours**

It's an honour and a privilege to speak here today remembering your patron, Saint Martin of Tours. Martin, like all the saints, is not a fiction or an abstract idea: he was a real person like you and me. His spirit is still with us now. Reflecting on his life, I felt we ought to think about our relationship with God. What does it mean to be a Christian, for you, for me, for each of us?

What is your relationship with God like?

How do you pray? We each have our own ways. For me, it's asking, listening and, mostly waiting. Being aware of God's presence, and waiting. What is God saying to you? We need to stop and listen. Just a few minutes. God is always present, waiting to speak to our inner being. He wants us to know that 'to each one of us a grace has been given'. He has a purpose for each of us, right in the middle of our lives, in our work, in our community. But he'll only ask of you what you're capable of.

What was Martin's relationship with God like?

God asked a great deal of Martin. When he was a young Roman soldier he cut his military cloak in two - to give half to a beggar who was cold and shivering. That night in a dream he saw Jesus wearing the half-cloak. Jesus' words came to mind: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." Martin realised the dream was a profound message - it was not literally about giving half his cloak. It was about the dignity of every human person. The essence of the message was about the connection between one person and another.

It was life changing. He was baptised, left the army, founded a monastery, lived as a hermit. Years later, when he was 54, the citizens of Tours dragged him out of seclusion and demanded him as their new bishop. He had sought a quiet life and was reluctant. The establishment didn't like this unkempt recluse. They thought he was unsuitable. But he gave himself to God's service, embracing the role with all his energy. Rather than live in the bishop's residence, he created and lived in a community of monks that welcomed the sick, the homeless and social outcasts. He became an outstanding leader, founding churches, training hundreds of priests, and challenging paganism so prevalent at the time.

God has a purpose for each of us and he'll reveal it in his own time. For most of my life I wasn't aware of my purpose. But in the past four years I've been called (reluctantly, like our friend Martin) from my private faith to get involved in God's work.

I'm a bishop's daughter who rebelled - I didn't go to church for many years. In my mid 20s I began to find my way and had a powerful conversion experience. I was eventually received into the Catholic Church. This was the beginning of a very private, spiritual journey lasting twenty years. But after my mother died, four years ago tonight, everything changed. She left me with a precious gift: a certainty that death is the transition to the life of the spirit, and an awareness of the community of saints.

After she went I became responsible for my father's legacy. He'd been well known as an England cricket captain and then as a Church of England bishop in Liverpool. With his Catholic counterpart, Archbishop Derek Worlock, he pioneered an ecumenical partnership that championed human dignity and the common good.

The 1980s was very tough for the North of England. The two bishops spoke out for fairness and justice and worked together as bridge builders and honest brokers at a time of great division, engaging with communities, police, business, local government, charities and agencies, encouraging them to work together across their differences to improve life chances for everyone. A generation of people were saying to me "we could do with that kind of passion now" - in other words more collaborative faith based leadership in the public square, ecumenical partnership, cross denominational social action.

Like many people I was feeling powerless to overcome the things that compromise human dignity: a widening gap between rich and poor, between the educated and uneducated; whole communities being left behind; economic arrangements with odds stacked in favour of the already wealthy: that can't be right. Foodbanks – in effect a segregated food system masking inadequate wages: can't be right. A welfare state that de-skills people and encourages dependency: can't be right. A housing policy that stokes higher prices and keeps more and more people stuck in generation rent. That can't be right. My faith was speaking to me about injustice but what could I do?

So if the bishops galvanised Christian involvement a generation ago I wondered if there was still any mileage in it. One day I had a vague sense that the Holy Spirit was asking me to do something. I prayed and listened, and waited... a long time, for instructions. I looked for allies and followed a trail, and after a year, a group formed around me. So Together for the Common Good began to emerge.

We worked together and now we encourage Christians of different traditions to cooperate as agents of change for the common good. Our approach transcends party politics and focuses on a renewed commitment to the flourishing of all people in civil society, with human dignity at its heart and where no one is left behind. We feel we are called to practice the common good - to 'encounter the other' - it's through listening respectfully that we can bridge divides, moving towards a place where negotiation rather than confrontation is the norm.

We're developing a Common Good Conversation framework to help ordinary people of estranged positions tackle problems and discern solutions together. We're holding cross-party conversations for MPs on how the principles of the common good can impact policy, and we'll be publishing a book on the common good next year.

The common good is a practice that we do together. Rather than opposing groups battling over a problem, it's about negotiating with people with whom we disagree and working out a solution together that allows everyone to flourish. It is a move away from an adversarial approach and the strident language of campaigning and developing a culture of dialogue and listening across political and social divides.

So it seems God has plans for Together for the Common Good - we do our best to follow instructions! Like Martin, we responded reluctantly at first, the momentum is clear and it's a privilege to be given a purpose and the grace to carry it out.

Fundamentally it's about our relationship our fellow human beings, and therefore with God. Even the governor of the Bank of England and the Director of the IMF are now saying that the growing gap between rich and poor must be urgently addressed if our democracy isn't going to fall apart. In other words it's in our self-interest: inequality leads to instability – there's plenty of evidence for this. Otherwise we're heading for a form of economic and educational apartheid where the privileged protect their interests at the expense of the majority and particularly the most vulnerable. This is not only dangerous, it is profoundly un-Christian and not very British: ...but it is where we're heading!

Charity is a word that has come to mean 'giving to' or 'donating' but its true meaning is 'love.' If charity is a way for us to distance ourselves from people who are struggling, then it's not love. It's one thing to give money, but it's more challenging and more effective to engage in friendship. After all, any of us could find ourselves in difficult circumstances, excluded from successful society - as a result of poor education, low income, relationship breakdown, illness, unemployment or redundancy. Real charity involves a gesture of human kindness – a relationship. Martin of Tours realised that Jesus – by wearing the half cloak himself in the dream - was pointing out that true charity is about the connection of one person with another.

Paradoxically we deprive ourselves of opportunities to grow as human beings if we seek only to associate with success and power. We become not only harder of heart but weaker in character too. Jean Vanier, founder of the international L'Arche community, is right that it's through living and working alongside the least powerful, the vulnerable, that the strong discover their own

humanity. Walking with someone in solidarity, in mutual respect, can be life changing and it benefits both parties. It prevents society fracturing and builds the common good.

So, what would a society built upon common good principles look like? Well the good news is that we're not starting from scratch. There are good, purpose-driven, profitable business models, where employers and employees enjoy mutual respect, where there is no estrangement; where loyalty and productivity are better; where not only economic but also moral choices drive supply chain and procurement practices. And other models like community land trusts, community energy projects, credit unions, mutuals and social enterprises offer practical examples that challenge the divisive paradigm of the amoral profit motive and the strange phenomenon of the super-rich. And when people find themselves working together for the common good it can be liberating. Power and ownership and risk and reward are distributed more widely, trust and friendships are built, new forms of solidarity emerge. When everyone is able to participate in the market, business is better. As the prophet Jeremiah said: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

The power of the common good is that it offers a positive challenge to counter the language of division. So rather than 'skivers and scroungers' vs 'hard-working families', it appeals to the potential of 'people-powered change', and the possibility of realising a genuinely public purpose which transcends short-term self-interest.

It also transcends partisan positions. The left's negativity towards business is ignorant, as are the suspicions of the right that the church's position on social justice is somehow Marxist. Both are just plain wrong and the Church's teaching on the common good shows that encounter rather than individualism and estrangement is what communities need to thrive.

So how do we build a life together in a diverse society with the common good at its heart?

Firstly we don't leave our faith at home. This is not about proselytising at work. It's about acting with moral integrity everywhere we go and applying the principles of our Christian social teaching to every issue we face: the common good, human dignity, solidarity, stewardship, reciprocity, and so on – into the mix. We need to ask the right questions: 'Does this serve the common good? Is anyone being left behind?' The choices we make will help to build up the human connectedness that is civil society, to counterbalance the powerful forces of the market and the state.

Secondly, as Christians we're being called to a special role – of reconciliation. We need to identify where there is division and find ways to build bridges. This is about re-imagining the Church: for too long Christians have chosen to exercise their faith through moralising whilst ignoring the far deeper moral issues of structural injustice with which we are all complicit.

Thirdly, by collaborating with our friends from other Christian traditions, we'll be more effective. We can take encouragement from the collaboration between Archbishop Justin who says 'the common good of the community and justice are at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian' and Pope Francis, who says we should 'go beyond our comfort zone. To live out the gospel according to Jesus means that we have to go out of ourselves to encounter others.'

How do we know what God wants us to do?

We need to be collaborators with God, and with other people of goodwill. Martin was a great collaborator. God isn't looking for the kinds of qualifications you and I would recognise. He has a role for each of us, no matter how limited our abilities. I can now see that I've come through a rather messy process and that God had a particular job lined up for me, even though it came in middle age and I constantly feel out of my depth. Martin was dragged from his comfort zone to work for God.

This is what we mean by being agents of change for the Common Good. St Paul reminded us, 'to each one of us a grace has been given.' What's your gift? If you're not sure, listen and wait, and it will become clear.

It's about collaborating with God and others to take humanity seriously. Trusting in God is always full of surprises. It can sometimes mean following a crazy dream. There is sometimes a reckless willingness to make a bold gesture that comes from listening to the Holy Spirit. Martin followed the call – he's a real person, not an abstract name from ancient history. Like all the saints he is here now in spirit to speak to us; on hand to help us; to intercede for us. I'm grateful for his intercession today.

We sometimes pray 'God, we pray that the desires of our hearts move closer to your desires for us.' God desires the common good of all humanity, and he needs us to be his hands and feet, his ears and eyes, his voice – without us, his ability to transform the world is limited. How close are our desires to his? Are we listening, waiting for God to speak to us?

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11 November 2014

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## **Readings**

### **Isaiah 61:1-3**

The spirit of the sovereign lord is on me, because the lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our god, to comfort all who mourn, and provide to those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the lord for the display of his splendour.

### **Ephesians 4:1-7,11-13**

As a prisoner for the lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle, be patient bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one lord, one faith, one baptism; one god and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us a grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, 'when he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare god's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

### **Matthew 25:31-40**

When the son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'come you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go and visit you? The king will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'