

Havant Lent 1 2019

As many of you will know, I used to minister in the Diocese of Chichester. Not surprisingly then I have a particular devotion to one of the greatest of those who had served there, St Richard, who was Bishop of Chichester from 1245 until his death in 1253. I was thrilled a fortnight ago to hear our choir sing a setting of part of what is probably his most well known legacy, *The Prayer of St Richard*.

Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ

For all the benefits Thou hast given me,

For all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me.

O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,

May I know Thee more clearly,

Love Thee more dearly,

Follow Thee more nearly

Today, the first Sunday in Lent, I am going to take the last three lines of that prayer as a guide to how to keep these holy 40 days of preparation for Holy Week and Easter. They are easy to remember:

May I know Thee more clearly,

Love Thee more dearly,

Follow Thee more nearly

Learning to know, love and follow Jesus better is the whole purpose of Lent. If anyone is still wondering how approach this Lent, how about these three themes as a guide: knowing, loving and following Jesus. And even if you have already decided, they might be a useful checklist.

All the traditional disciplines of Lent can be looked at from one or other of these perspectives.

Study groups or spiritual reading help us **know him more clearly**;

Special liturgies, additional or more fervent prayer, fasting and almsgiving help us **love him more dearly**;

Self-examination and confession with the intention to amend our lives help us **follow him more nearly**.

Try to picture these three themes as forming a kind of wheel, each one leading on to the next in a continuous circle, so that wherever you join the circle you will pass through all three in due course, because all three are necessary parts of being a Christian.

A wheel you can enter at any point is quite a helpful image because different people are different in temperament.

Some find **following Jesus** in practical action, discipleship and obedience the easiest way of expressing their faith; other people are just overwhelmed by their sense of God's *love* and

their own longing for God; others need above all to understand, to *know*. But wherever we start, whatever your temperament draws us to, in the end, everyone needs all three.

But can we put them in any order of importance?

Just consider this:

In heaven, Saint Augustine wrote, “*we shall rest and we shall see*” - that is to say, we shall know God as he is, not seeing him, as at present, through a glass darkly. So **knowing God is** obviously the most important.

But God is love and it is by love that we are united with God, so **love** is obviously the most important.

In this world, however, it is in action that our faith is proved and tested, through action that our faith is seen, so **faithful obedient discipleship, following**, is obviously the most important.

So it's probably a silly exercise to try to decide which is the most important.

And yet there is a certain logic to the order in which St Richard prayed: first to know, second, to love and third to follow. **Only to the extent that we know God can we love properly and only to the extent that we love properly can we act properly.** So we really do need to know God better if we are to get the rest right.

This was wonderfully expressed in a prayer by the same St Augustine, writing about 750 years before St Richard:

*Eternal God,
the light of the minds that know thee,
the joy of the hearts that love thee,
the strength of the wills that serve thee;
**grant us so to know thee that we may truly love thee,
so to love thee that we may freely serve thee,**
to the glory of thy holy name.*

Notice especially the lines: ***grant us so to know thee that we may truly love thee,
so to love thee that we may freely serve thee.***

That's exactly what St Richard was getting at in his prayer, and in exactly the same order. None of it is accidental. To serve God, we must love him - or our service would be mere slavish obedience. But to love God, we must know him - or our love would be mere emotion.

So if you want a simple prayer for every day, how about

***May I know Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly***