

Sermon given at St John's Cathedral Pentecost Sunday Evensong. 4.6.17.
St Lawrence. Mystic.

Firstly may I say how happy I am to be here at the Cathedral on this Pentecost Sunday. My thanks to the Dean for inviting me to preach this evening at Evensong.

My sermon tonight will be a little different in that I will be saying very little from my own view of things, and instead will let Brother Lawrence tell his own story about his way of life.

I first came across the good Brother years ago in a book titled "The Practice of the Presence of God"¹ written by Joseph De Beaufort in 1693 two years after Br Lawrence's death.

The book tells the story of Br Lawrence, and how he practised his dominant ideal in living ever in God's presence.

The version of the book that I found, is introduced and translated by E.M. Blaiklock in 1981, from the 1693 French version.

When I first came across it, I was studying at St Francis College, and I but skimmed over the pages, yet there was something in the simplicity of the holiness of the man in the pages that I flipped through, that stuck with me, and which finally led me back to him in more recent times, to ponder more upon his way of life.

A thumb nail sketch of our brother in the introduction of the book tells us that he was born Nicholas Herman in Lorraine, in modern day France in 1614.

He became a soldier - probably while still in his teens, and during a Swedish incursion, he was wounded and soon after left the army - it is thought with a permanent disability.

He found employment as a footman – not a good one by his own admission. At the age of 18 he had his first inner spiritual encounter with God while gazing at a leafless tree, sometime in the winter months.

It was at this time, and through a vision of God's providence and power in the created world, that he was filled with a deep love for God.

¹ Joseph De Beaufort, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, translated by E. M. Blaiklock, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1981.

He said of the experience that it was never dulled or erased from his memory, remaining as vivid 40 years later, as it had been at age 18.

In midlife Brother Lawrence was received as a lay brother into the order of the discalced Carmelites.

It was at this time after four years of traumatic stress, caused by a deep belief that he was lost to God through his sins, that Brother Lawrence abandoned all thought that kept his soul from the love of God, and by a complete submission to God, began the development of his special way of life in the presence of God.

Brother Lawrence spent his first 15 years at the priory doing kitchen duties.

Even though he had a strong natural aversion to this form of work, he trained himself to do everything there for the love of God.

Other monks told the story of how Br. Lawrence could be heard singing joyfully to the Lord as he cooked meals and cleaned pots.

Later in life he worked as a sandal maker and repairer with the same happiness and love.

He soon gained the reputation as someone who experienced profound peace in all he did.

Brother Lawrence ever stressed the vital power of Faith.

It was the key to all his practices and divine awareness.

It was his rule for living.

He urged that his fellow beings should feed their soul with a loving conception of God and from that derive great joy in being his.

He taught that to give oneself utterly to God in pure abandonment, in temporal and spiritual matters alike, one would find contentment in the doing of God's will, whether God took one through sufferings or consolations.

He did not depend upon self-generated knowledge or learning, but upon knowing by participation or knowing by communion with God.

He told De Beaufort that faith was the only light he used to teach and guide himself in all the ways of God.

He constantly conversed with God while doing his daily chores and expressed much happiness even in the mundane, for he accepted that God was always with him.

He understood that it is not needful to be in church to be with God, for one can make a chapel of one's heart, to which one can withdraw to have gentle, humble loving communion with him.

God is closer to us than we know – he told a friend.

Everything he heard others say, and everything he found in books, all that he wrote himself, seemed insipid compared with the grandeur of God and Jesus Christ, which faith would reveal to him.

He said that God alone is able to make himself known as he really is.

We seek in reasoning and in the sciences, as in a bad copy, for what we neglect to see in an excellent original.

God depicts himself in the depths of our soul, and we are not willing to see him there.

Not only would Brother Lawrence look on God as ever present in his soul by faith, but in all that he saw, in all that happened to him, he raised his heart at once, passing from the thing created to its Creator.

Br Lawrence's way of prayer was his life experience.

The time of formal prayer was in no way different for him than any other.

He obeyed the rules of the Priory in terms of set prayer times, but he neither wanted nor asked for them, because his most demanding work did not divert him from God.

Regarding confession - he would confess his sins to his confessor and then let them go- never dwelling on them or harbouring anxieties that would get in the way of his intimate relationship with God.

Brother Lawrence's spiritual principles included looking always to God and his glory in all that he did, he said, and he undertook.

He taught that when the spiritual life such as this is undertaken, one needs to be dependent upon Grace to be brought into their naked truth by trial and tribulation, so that one can give their hearts totally to him.

We are made for God alone, he said. God would not think it wrong for us to abandon ourselves and devote ourselves entirely to him. In him we see better what we lack than we could perceive in ourselves by all our meditations.

Brother Lawrence urges us all to enter into the most holy practice of the presence of God –that is, to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with God at all times, every moment without rule or restriction, and above all, at times of temptation, distress and dryness.

Br Lawrence taught that the means of attaining the presence of God, is by living a life of purity and keeping the soul's gaze on God within, which always is done quietly, humbly, lovingly, and without giving way to any disturbance or anxiety.

God is within us - intimately present within us, he wrote. Trust ourselves to God abandon ourselves to him alone.

To close, I would like to say that, I believe that Br Lawrence's way of life, witnesses to his acceptance of the simplest of truths: that in Christ we have been made one with God.

The Lord be with you.