

Reception of the Remains of King Richard III

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On Sunday 22 March, Cardinal Vincent preached at a service of Compline for the reception of the remains of King Richard III at Leicester Cathedral.

Cardinal Vincent joined the Bishop of Leicester, Rt Rev Tim Stevens, as well as representatives of other Churches and religions from across Great Britain at the reception of the king's remains.



In his homily, Cardinal Vincent spoke of the king's varied reputation as a monarch and how this related to his baptism, saying, 'baptism does not guarantee holiness of life or saintliness of nature. But it gives a fundamental and enduring shape to a journey through life, in all its struggles and failures.'

Alluding to the community of Franciscan Friars who buried Richard 'with formal prayer even if also in haste', the Cardinal noted that stones from the Greyfriars Church were used in the 16th century to repair the St Martin's Church, which is now Leicester Cathedral.

'It is surely symbolic that materials from the first burial place of the King are in all probability still part of the fabric of this building in which his remains are again to be laid to rest. Our Christian histories have become intertwined in a way, we pray, that will now lead us to give a more coherent and united witness to the truths of faith which we proclaim together this evening.'

The full homily of Card. Nichols follows

Given at the Service of Compline for the Reception of the remains of King Richard III in Leicester Cathedral on Sunday 22 March 2015.

My brothers and sisters, we are gathered in this Cathedral or joining in through the media, to remember the extraordinary life of King Richard III and to pray for the eternal repose of his soul.

Two moments in this ceremony, so rich in meaning and symbolism, can focus our reflection. Both concern the coffin of this King. First: it was sprinkled with holy water; and secondly, it was revered in the gesture of incensing. These moments took place as we welcomed the King's coffin into its place of rest.

As you will recall, this sprinkling with holy water is a reminder that King Richard, at the beginning of his life, was baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He was thereby called to live as a follower of Jesus Christ.

The course of his tumultuous life has been well traced, caught up as it was in the deadly struggle between dynastic families. In his life he must have known little peace. From his earliest years, Richard's life bore all the consequences of the violence of the age and its power struggles. He was a child of war, for a while a refugee in Europe, as he was moved from place to place, always in search of safety and protection. At the age of 17 he emerged as a public figure and from then on showed his steely ability to pursue his ambitions. In his day, political power was invariably won or maintained on the battlefield and only by ruthless determination, strong alliances and a willingness to employ the use of force, at times with astonishing brutality.

We may thank God that here political power struggles are now settled in a different manner.

Still today, over 500 years later, his life is studied and constantly reassessed, a window into a critical period of our history and a beguiling source of speculation. Shakespeare's 'bubble reputation' quickly comes to mind, especially in this time of fashion for reconstructionist biographies in which saints can become villains and villains can become saints.

The deepest intentions of Richard have always been hard to fathom. Yet that is often true for many of us. Within the depth of his heart, amidst all his fears and ambitions, there surely lay a strong desire to provide his people with stability and improvement. In his two short years as King, he reshaped vital aspects of the legal system, developing the presumption of innocence, the concept of blind justice and the practice of granting bail rather than being held in jail. He established the Court of Requests to give wider access to justice and insisted on the translation into English of all written laws and statutes so that they were readily accessible to all. Nevertheless his reign was marked by unrest and the fatal seepage of loyalty and support.

All of this reminds us, if we need reminding, that baptism does not guarantee holiness of life or saintliness of nature. But it gives a fundamental and enduring shape to a journey through life, in all its struggles and failures. This 'King of England and France and Lord of Ireland', to give him his self-styled title, was a man of prayer, a man of an anxious devotion. In a surviving prayer, we hear him pleading with God for the protection of the Archangel Michael and for deliverance from his enemies. His prayer was indeed realistic. After the battle of Towton, in 1461, the most brutal day of fighting ever seen on English soil, he established a chantry chapel to provide for the celebration of Mass and for prayers for all who died there, both Yorkists and Lancastrians alike. He fully expected similar devotions and prayers to accompany his own death. Indeed the Collect which we will shortly pray is said to have been recited daily by the clergy of Middleham College following the King's death. We too play our part in this prayer, here this evening, tomorrow at Holy Cross Church and in the days to come.

At the sprinkling of his coffin, the prayer expressed our faith that the baptised are joined to the death of Jesus so that 'through his merits, who died and rose again for us' we may 'pass to our joyful resurrection', the destiny of all who open their hearts and lives to the living God.

This faith was also vividly expressed in the incensing of the coffin of the King. Traditionally, words accompany incensing: 'Let our prayer arise before you O Lord, like this incense'. So too we trust that even as the incense rose before our eyes this evening, so too our prayer will be carried to the throne of God. Indeed, incense signals to us the presence of God. It is a sign of his majesty. We pray that, being brought into the presence of that Divine majesty, Richard may be embraced by God's merciful love, there to await the final resurrection of all things in the fullness of time.

This is the horizon against which our actions take place on this solemn evening. With God there is a different timescale, a day is like a thousand years. So our prayers for this King of our Land, our prayers for his eternal rest, are not impeded or made invalid by the passing of these years. We pray for him

today just as those who prayed for him at the time of his death in 1485, those whose hearts were not filled with the vengeance of victory or the hatred of an enemy. Among those who prayed for him then was the community of Franciscan Friars, so nearby here, who surely buried him with formal prayer even if also in haste.

So much that has happened in these intervening centuries. In 1538 stone and building materials were taken from that Church of the Greyfriars and used to repair the nearby St Martin's Church, now this Cathedral Church of Leicester. It is surely symbolic that materials from the first burial place of the King are in all probability still part of the fabric of this building in which his remains are again to be laid to rest. Our Christian histories have become intertwined in a way, we pray, that will now lead us to give a more coherent and united witness to the truths of faith which we proclaim together this evening.

It is also against this horizon of eternity, in the light of God's merciful promise, that we best conduct our struggles for justice, for peace and concord among all people. Again and again, the lessons of history are clear: force of arms alone never brings lasting peace; political ambition, if it is not to become toxic, must always be tutored by a determination to serve, especially those most in need; reconciliation is best inspired by the light of the promise of a God-given peace which is our common and enduring destiny.

May the dignity of this Compline, the beauty of its prayer, the richness of its gestures of reconciliation, enliven in us all that desire to serve rather than be served, to heal rather than to gloat in victories great or small, to honour and respect the other rather than seek advantage. In these ways, may our kingdom reflect the eternal Kingdom of God, to which we commend the soul of this King even as, at last, we permit his remains to rest in peace.

Amen

Card. Vincent Nichols - Westminster Archdiocese