

WEEKLY SERMON

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St Maximilian Kolbe and the Self-Sacrificial Love of Jesus

'O Death, where is your sting?' 1 Corinthians 15, 55

Christians believe that, through the dying and rising of Jesus, death has lost its power such that what we call death is no more than a transition to a richer and fuller life in the Risen Lord.

This means, amongst other things, that the saints are our friends. Christians of the past, though dead in the eyes of the world, are fully and completely alive with us in Jesus. They are present in our worship just like any other member of the congregation. They accompany us in prayer and they inspire us with their lives of faith. This is why the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks about 'the great cloud of witnesses' with whom we are surrounded.

August is a lovely month not just because it is the Summer season, but because we journey through it in company with a wonderful range of saints. Lawrence, Dominic, Clare, the Blessed Virgin Mary all inspire us with their remarkable lives and help us to live the Christian life more vividly. But an August Saint I find especially inspiring points us to one of the darkest and most painful events in human history. His name is Maximilian Kolbe and his feast day is August 14th.

Kolbe was a Polish priest and a Franciscan Friar, a man of great learning and evangelistic courage. After the Nazi invasion of Poland and into the darkest years of the war, Kolbe was based in a small monastery in Krakow where refuge was given secretly to members of the Jewish community. In 1941 the monastery was closed down and Kolbe was taken to the concentration camp in nearby Auschwitz.

At the end of July, a prisoner escaped from the camp which led the Nazi authorities to command that one in ten prisoners in Kolbe's section should be executed as a deterrent. One of those chosen, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out in desperation, 'My wife, my children!' On seeing his terror, Kolbe stepped forward and took Gajowniczek's place. Along with nine others he was taken to an underground bunker where they were to be starved to death. Two weeks later, only Kolbe was still alive and so he was executed with a lethal injection on August 14th.

The role of the saints as our friends is to point us to Christ so that we root our lives more firmly in him, and Kolbe does that in an especially powerful way because he shows us the power of sacrificial love. On the cross Jesus gave up his life as a gift for others. He didn't ask if those others were worthy of his death (and of course we are not). He died for us even though we are sinners. In taking the place of Gajowniczek, Maximilian Kolbe did exactly the same. He emulated Christ in giving his life for another.

Sacrificial love is something that our culture completely fails to understand. The question a capitalist worldview encourages us to ask is 'What's in it for me?' In every transaction, every decision, every relationship we are encouraged to put our own needs first, to make personal satisfaction a primary goal.

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That is simply not the way of the Gospel. The self-sacrificial love of Christ causes us to ask precisely the opposite question. How can I make of my life a gift for others? Jesus demonstrated that self-giving love again and again in his earthly life: as he washed feet, as he fed the hungry, as he touched the lepers, as he spent time with the outcast and unrespectable. What about us? Where in our lives do we model the self-giving love of Christ? How are we making of our lives a gift to the world?

We may not be called to make a sacrifice as extreme as the one offered by St Maximilian Kolbe, but there are still countless ways in which we can model that same self-sacrificial love. We do so whenever we put service ahead of self, whenever we put another person's needs ahead of our own.

When we give sacrificially to church or to a charity; when we ring round neighbours who are lonely in lockdown; when we volunteer our time for a charity or community project; when we cook a meal for a new neighbour or a young parent struggling with children; when we engage with people of different faith or ethnicity; when we share our faith with someone who is struggling to make sense of their lives; when we stop and listen to the person with a mental health problem – in these and so many other ways we are allowing ourselves to be inspired by the saints to live like Jesus.

St Maximilian Kolbe's is an exceptional life, and we give thanks for him. But as we do so, let's try also to live like him.

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