

Dear all

Today is the feast of St. Catherine of Siena.

The following is an edited version of the article on the Catholic Online website:

St. Catherine of Siena was born during the outbreak of the plague in Siena, Italy on March 25, 1347. She was the 25th child born to her mother, although half of her brothers and sisters did not survive childhood.

At the age of 16, Catherine's parents proposed that she marry her sister's widower, but Catherine was against this. She began fasting and cut her hair short to mar her appearance.

At first her opposed this, but her fasting and her devotion to her family finally convinced them. She joined the Third Order of St. Dominic, which allowed her to associate with a religious society while living at home.

St. Catherine developed a habit of giving things away and she continually gave away her family's food and clothing to people in need. At the age of 21, she had an experience she referred to as her "mystical marriage to Christ." In her vision, she was told to re-enter public life and to help the poor and sick. She immediately re-joined her family and went into public to help people in need.

She often visited hospitals and homes where the poor and sick were found. Her activities quickly attracted followers who helped her in her mission to serve the poor and sick. Eventually she began to travel, calling for reform of the Church and for people to confess and to love God totally. She became involved in politics, and was key in working to keep city states loyal to the Pope. She was also credited with helping to start a crusade to the Holy Land. On one occasion, she visited a condemned political prisoner and was credited with saving his soul, which she saw being taken up to heaven at the moment of his death.

St. Catherine was instrumental in restoring the Papacy to Rome and in brokering peace deals during a time of factional conflict and war between the Italian city states. She also established a monastery for women in 1377 outside of Siena. She is credited with composing over 400 letters, her Dialogue, which is her definitive work, and her prayers. These works are so influential that St. Catherine would later be declared a Doctor of the Church (the only female one).

By 1380, she had become ill, possibly because of her habit of extreme fasting. Within weeks, she was unable to use her legs. She died on April 29, following a stroke just a week prior.

St. Catherine is the patroness against fire, illness, the United States, Italy, miscarriages, people ridiculed for their faith, sexual temptation, and nurses.

A few years ago, Richard Coles wrote this about her:

It is the Feast of Catherine of Siena, one of the greatest saints of the Church. She was the most marvellously passionate Dominican nun who received the stigmata from holy rays emanating from a crucifix, ate nothing but the Blessed Sacrament for eight years (in the end it used to jump out of the hand of the priest and fly of its own accord into her mouth), levitate so buoyantly it was as if she was filled with helium, and fall into the kitchen fire during ecstasies but emerge from it unharmed. So spectacular was her holiness that she became the confidante of popes and kings and wrote a correspondence which remains one of the highest achievements of early Tuscan literature. When she died her body was found to be incorrupt, so some other Dominican nuns chopped her head and put it in a bag to smuggle it home with them, but unfortunately they had to pass through a bag check. When the guard opened the bag, however, it was found to be full of

rose petals, but they turned back into the saint's severed head when they got back to their convent. They put it in the church of St Dominic where it can still be seen with one of her thumbs that they also stole.

I'm always fascinated by the stories of the saints. Some of them are quite fantastic, and have acquired all sorts of legendary elements. Eyebrows raised at least at some of the claims. The role of saints in our lives will depend on where we are on a spectrum, which runs from total disbelief (we are all saints – what is so special about them), through they are a good example to us/ suitably honoured for their role in the history of the church, through we can ask for their intercession on our behalf to a total belief in all the miracles and stories attributed to them. Catherine very obviously was a significant person in her lifetime, and in many respects, a good role-model, though possibly not in her eating habits.

For those who like parody videos, this is a rather good one on ABBA – thanks Philip Astle for recommending it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOXtKOziD6M&feature=youtu.be>

On a completely different level, Chris Pearce sent me a video of Pavarotti's 11 year old granddaughter following in the great singer's footsteps. She thought you might be interested. Is it in the genes?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9PQ7qPklUM>

Today's reflection from St Paul's Cathedral is a very powerful reflection on when life does not seem fair.

I thought to Understand This: Specially-commissioned reflections on the wisdom of the Psalms for a time of Pandemic

Psalm 73 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Plea for Relief from Oppressors

A Psalm of Asaph.

- ¹ Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.
- ² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.
- ³ For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- ⁴ For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
- ⁵ They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.
- ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.
- ⁷ Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.
- ⁸ They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
- ⁹ They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.
- ¹⁰ Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.
- ¹¹ And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
- ¹² Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.
- ¹³ All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
- ¹⁴ For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.

¹⁵ If I had said, "I will talk on in this way," I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.
¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.
¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.
¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!
²⁰ They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms.
²¹ When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
²² I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.
²³ Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour.
²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength^[f] of my heart and my portion forever.
²⁷ Indeed, those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you.
²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, to tell of all your works.

There's a lot that's not fair in the impact of this Covid-19 pandemic. It is not a 'great leveller' as many have claimed previously. Those who are poor, in crowded homes, in care homes, those from ethnic minority backgrounds and those suffering domestic abuse are disproportionately affected, to name but a few. And there are many, many more who have been personally affected with illness and bereavement, often alone in the cruellest of circumstances through no fault of their own.

One of the aspects of trauma is the shattering of our assumptions that life is basically safe and reliable, and that if we work hard and play fair, things will generally go well for us - our efforts will be rewarded. The psalmist cried out to God – it's just not fair, where's the justice in this? I keep faithful to you, I pray, I keep the commandments, and yet others who ignore you and ridicule me for believing in you, seem to be rewarded with good fortune far more than me?

It takes a lifetime to grow into what we were told in childhood – life isn't fair. We wouldn't be human if we didn't rage about it sometimes. Only by doing that, by naming before God our anger about things, can we work through to a place of accepting what is, and find God meeting us in that place. 'Then thought I to understand this, but it was too hard for me' says the psalmist, 'until I entered the sanctuary of God...' (v16). As Jesus did in Gethsemane, bring your anguish, your confusion into God's sanctuary, God's presence, till it is spent, and your soul can begin to quiet in his presence and know;

'Though my flesh and my heart fail me,
God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever' (v26).

Our perspective is shifted, and from that place of stillness and strength in God, we begin to move forwards to be and do what we can.

Hilary Ison

Nick Fawcett's prayer today seems to reflect this very well – echoing the faith of the psalmist in v. 26:

You're here, Lord, though we do not see it.
You're here, though we do not feel it.
You're here, though it doesn't seem it.
You're here, though our plight denies it.

You're here, though we cannot grasp it.
You're here, though we sometimes doubt it.
You're here, though our dread obscures it.
You're here, though we can't believe it.
You're here, Lord, as much in the night as in the day, the bad as in the good.
You're here.
You're here.
Amen.

Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark