



## Saints – Lawrence

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*2 Maccabees 7: 1–12 Acts 7: 51–end*

What an honour to be preaching in Trinity Chapel, a sacred place with a stunning mixed choral tradition where I often worshipped during my own Cambridge days some thirty years ago. I'm very grateful to the Dean of Chapel for the invitation, and also for the opportunity it gives to renew our friendship. The last time he invited me to preach was at an early morning Eucharist in Peterhouse chapel when I was still an ordinand. He had given me no hint that the Master, the eminent cleric and theologian Henry Chadwick, would be there. To say that I shook in my shoes in delivering the sermon would be an understatement. The Very Revd Professor showed me a kind of pity, I suppose, in commenting at the end of mass that he had been able to hear me. I rather wished he hadn't. Anyway thank you, Fr Michael, for having me back.

As it is an honour to be preaching in Trinity Chapel, so it is to be preaching about St Lawrence, one of the most celebrated figures of Christian witness in the Roman tradition – scene of the majority of my own ministry to date. I was vicar of the Church of England's parish in Rome until this summer, and had been for nearly twenty years – to which was added for seven years the responsibility of serving as archdeacon of Italy and Malta. And although these jobs can't be described as having been a martyrdom – sunshine, good food and wine in abundance – I'd be less than honest if I denied that they had their 'ups and downs'. I may not have ended up roasted on a grid-iron like the worthy Lawrence but professional circumstances did at times provoke a certain warmth under the clerical collar.

Christian witness is captured in the record of word and deed, and in Rome, as elsewhere, celebrated in monumental architecture and art. Three large basilicas dating from the years following the toleration of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in 313 AD variously commemorate the traditional locations of Lawrence's imprisonment, martyrdom and burial half a century earlier. As Pope Sixtus II's archdeacon, Lawrence's deeds of Christian witness perhaps surprisingly exhibit a cheeky humour as well as a moral seriousness: entrusted with the material property of the church on the pope's arrest, when required to hand it over to the civil authorities he takes three days to gather together the halt, the lame, the widow and the orphan to be presented to the persecuting emperor as the church's riches. It's as if he says, 'You value material things, the church values the poor.' Pope Francis in these days is saying something similar to worldly power – but, just like Lawrence, with an eye to the sustainability and future of the church's mission, he's also trying to keep the monetary patrimony secure. If that's 'having your cake and eating it', what Jesuit philosophy defines as casuistry, I would point you in their defence to Jesus' words about innocence and cunning, doves and serpents, right hand and left. If the boss approves, then I guess it's OK.

Archdeacon Lawrence is Rome's clerical martyr par excellence, a puzzle perhaps when one considers that the *liber pontificalis* claims that more than ten popes were martyred in the first three centuries of Christianity. Why should the archdeacon inspire more devotion, say, than his martyred pontifical master, Pope Sixtus? For over a thousand years artistic cycles of Lawrence's life and deeds are found in a succession of private papal chapels, always balanced by representations of the Christian protomartyr and deacon, St Stephen. Thus the so-called Sancta Sanctorum of the Lateran Palace shows mosaic busts of the martyr deacons of Jerusalem and Rome on the ceiling of the 8th-century sanctuary, and also early Gothic style frescoes of Lawrence and Stephen in the chapel's remodelling for Pope Nicholas IV at the end of the 13th. Artistically his modifications mark the end of the thousand-year papal occupancy of the Lateran: the Holy See was just about to experience its 70-year 'Babylonian Captivity' at Avignon.

With the pope's lasting and undisputed return to Rome in 1417 the Italian Renaissance came along with him. The 15th-century papal preferred residence was the Vatican, and another Pope Nicholas, this time number five, commissioned a Stephen and Lawrence cycle for his private chapel there. A masterpiece of technical brilliance from the Florentine Dominican Fra Angelico, it also exhibits the hand of his most celebrated workshop collaborator, Benozzo Gozzoli. Cutting edge as the painting might be in stylistic terms its narrative and subject matter are profoundly traditional.

Emphasizing the parallel lives and deaths of Stephen and Lawrence lent dignity and authority to claims made by the Roman church: Rome, it was claimed, had succeeded Jerusalem as the focus of God's activity in the world, the pope was the successor of the apostle Peter, and just as Peter had appointed Stephen one of the first seven deacons of the church, Sixtus had ordained Lawrence to be one of Rome's traditional seven deacons. Fra Angelico brings the parallels right up to date by using portraits of Nicholas V in his representations of Pope Sixtus. The centre of Christian gravity had been well and truly shifted from the world's navel, as Jerusalem was classically considered, to its head – Roma Caput Mundi.

But none of this geopolitical theology explains why Lawrence becomes the Roman clerical exemplar of martyrdom. We need to dig a little further down into the practices of the Medieval papal household to find the reason. Before the formal emergence of the electoral College of Cardinals, sometime in the 11th century, the papal chancellery was staffed by notaries and headed up by the Archdeacon of Rome. The earliest Canon Law forbade the translation of bishops from one See to another, so you literally could not become pope if you were already in bishops' orders. More often than not the previous pope's archdeacon would succeed him. Things began to change with the contested translation of one Bishop Formosus from the Suburbicarian See of Portus to Rome itself. He survived a short reign with no legal proceedings but the law caught up with him *post mortem*. Formosus was exhumed, tried and condemned at the infamous Cadaver Synod of January 897 AD with the actor in this grisly proceeding, Pope Stephen VI, being none other than archdeacon of Rome and therefore heir apparent of Formosus' predecessor. Whilst alive and ruling Formosus had promoted his rival against his will to the See of Anagni in the hope of preventing his future election: clearly he hoped not to have set a precedent whereas he in fact did. Confused? Welcome to the Ecclesiastical History of the Dark Ages. But the fact remains that throughout most of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages being the archdeacon of Rome was the surest ticket to being the pope in waiting. Hence the exalted nature of devotion to St Lawrence in the Roman church.

As I claimed earlier Christian witness is captured in the record of word and deed – and the most authoritative hagiography of Western Christendom, *Legenda Auria*, The Golden Legend, was still influencing the iconography of Fra Angelico's Stephen/Lawrence cycle some three centuries after its compilation by Jacobus de Voragine. It is thanks to Jacobus that we find Lawrence even exhibiting his cheeky humour in verbal exchanges with his persecutors whilst frying on the grid-iron: whilst not exactly being as snappy as the oft-cited paraphrase, 'Turn me over, I'm done on this side', saying 'with a glad cheer, Thou cursed wretch, thou hast roasted that one side, turn that other, and eat' still, I would say, exhibits considerable *sangfroid*.

The Greek Syrian powers persecuted the Jews of the Macabee period with horrid torments as our first reading recounted; Jewish leaders inaugurated the tradition of Christian martyrdom in the stoning of St Stephen as we heard in the second reading; the Roman authorities kept up the tradition as we know from the stories of saints like Sixtus II and the Deacon St Lawrence. The Catholic Church, and a whole array of other churches and religions took up the baton of violent repression for centuries. Totalitarian regimes model the format today but sadly even democracies sometimes feel the force of exerting power and stifling dissent though torture, execution and even assassination. The vision of Christ crucified but risen is the reward of the Christian martyr – the peace of God is what we should all be striving for.

Holy deacons, Stephen and Lawrence, pray that we may strive to witness to that peace.