

Each of us in our own way are relic hoarders. We keep things that connect us to special people and important moments from the past. In winter there's my late grandfather's long coat, still heavy on my shoulders. I use a seventy-year-old chalice that once belonged to a priest who died in 2006. And tucked away in a drawer is the service leaflet from the first Sunday I ever came to Downside Abbey for Mass — Trinity Sunday, 2019. Relics remind us where we have come from, and they point us towards the goodness we are called to carry on.

Here at Downside we encounter relics of the past every day. They smile down on us from the photographs in the corridors. The names of great Gregorians and benefactors are carved into the walls. Even on the way to coffee after Mass (or charging downstairs towards brunch), we pass the roll of honour of those who died in the Second World War. We are reminded too of the Weld family, of Lord Petre, and of Abbot Christopher Butler who later became a bishop. And even some of you, on the way, are immortalised by photographs of life at Downside; relics of the more recent past.

Cardinal Gasquet, who as Prior here started the building of this Church, had a gift for acquiring relics. Thanks to him, the Shrine of St Oliver Plunkett (behind the basses) contains almost all the relics of that saint of God. The Church has always treasured such things: a fragment of bone or hair, a first-class relic, or a letter or belonging, known as a second-class one. Recently, a colleague gave me his late mother's crucifix to whom I had given the last rites, a cross that was not so much a first or second-class relic; but it did survive the bombing of St Mary's in Bath during World War II. This crucifix, now hanging in the Old Chapel Sacristy, inspires hope amid the trials of daily life.

But there is one relic somewhere at Downside that I would one day love to see: a relic of the true Cross on which Our Lord Jesus Christ died. There are many such relics around the world, the biggest and most famous are on display at the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Rome. The relic at Downside, a gram or two of the true Cross, once belonged to King Alfred the Great in the ninth century. It was passed to Glastonbury Abbey for several hundred years, before Queen Mary Tudor safeguarded and venerated it in her chapel. Then to Downside, that I sometimes describe to guests as *relic central*.

We may not be able to see the relic of the true Cross today, but the sign of the Cross of Jesus inscribed on us at baptism is indelible. We make the sign of the cross several times during Mass. Crucifixes hang on chains around many of your necks, sodality crosses too, and the Cross is given pride of place in the procession. At school the cross is even on sports kit and stationery, on letterheads, and even emblazoned on the front desks both in reception and in the sixth-form centre.

A priest at the altar should always have the cross in sight, a reminder of the holy sacrifice we are celebrating. The Cross is our identity both as Christians, as a school and in the Church at large.

In some ways, when you think about it, how strange it is for us to celebrate, or identify with, what for the Roman Empire was a tool of execution, meant to end a life in pain and disgrace. And today the Cross stands before us as something precious, no longer feared but cherished. Because by His death on that Cross, Jesus transformed darkness into light. The instrument of death became the tree of life. Crude planks of wood became a treasure beyond price. As the expanded mixed chamber choir will sing during communion: *Faithful cross, above all other, One and only noble tree: Sweetest wood and sweetest iron, Sweetest weight is hung on thee!*

The Cross is something that claims us. When you trace it on your forehead, your heart, your shoulders, you are saying: *I belong to Christ*. When you see it in a classroom or on your kit, it is a reminder that His love reaches into the ordinary parts of your life. And when you carry your own difficulties: fear of exams, friendship struggles, the griefs you don't always share: that too is carrying the Cross, and you are not carrying it alone. He has gone there before you.

Because St Paul tells us in the second reading from Philippians that Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, *emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross*. Such is the strength of God's love. He chose the way of humility, not to condemn the world, but to save it. This is why the Cross is exalted: God raised him high, and gave him the name above every other name, so that *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*.

This is why today's Gospel matters so much. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life*. That is the decision the Cross asks of you: will you believe in Jesus? Will you let His love save you? See it on any crucifix: *Love so amazing, so divine; demands my soul, my life, my all*.

Dear sisters and brothers, to believe in Jesus is more than agreeing with an idea. It is about beginning a relationship with Him, walking with Him, treasuring His commandments, discovering His way of love as a path to real life. This is the treasure that outlasts every relic: the treasure of knowing Christ and sharing in His eternal life. And one day, when every knee bows before Him, we shall see that treasure face to face, in all its glory.

*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.*