

## SOLEMNITY OF ST LAURENCE

Michael Koulianos was seven years old when he first encountered the power and living presence of Jesus.

As his surname might suggest his family were originally from Greece and then emigrated to America. He was brought up in the Orthodox Church, where many of his uncles and cousins were priests, bishops or Archbishops. On one occasion he accompanied his parents to the home where his aunt lived because his uncle had just died. Greek tradition meant that all close family members would gather for a meal to offer condolences. The house was crowded so young Michael had to sit on the floor at the feet of his father taking in the sombre atmosphere which was heavy with grief. He recalled the cries of his aunt and the other women which were interrupted by knocking on the front door.

Into the room came a new priest, Fr Anthony Morfessis. Immediately, young Michael felt the atmosphere change when this unknown priest came into the room. In his seven-year-old mind he recalls that he said to himself: *“God just came into this room...this man is a friend of God! This man knows Jesus and I knew it by looking at him.”* Having greeted the widow, he prayed with all the mourners. The wailing stopped almost instantly, and the room became calm. Fr Anthony then fixed his eyes on Michael Koulianos’s father, Theo and asked a simple but direct question that would change his life. *“Have you ever seen Jesus?”*, the priest asked. *“No, father I haven’t.”* *“Why not?”* Fr Anthony shot back. *“I don’t know Father”* Theo Koulianos was a tough man, the sought you didn’t play with if you didn’t want trouble. *“Do you want to see Him.”* Fr Anthony said. Young Michael couldn’t believe his ears. This could only mean one thing; Jesus was going to show up. He was so excited; he could feel and hear his own heart beating fast.

Fr Anthony then moved towards Michael’s father, who unknown to the priest had just had complex surgery on his left knee and could not walk unaided. Fr Anthony gripped Theo’s knee with his large strong hand and making the sign of the cross said: *“In the name of Jesus, I command you to walk!”* So, Theo Koulianos asked for his crutches. Fr Anthony said: *“I didn’t mention crutches, I said walk in Jesus’ name.”* Theo stood, took a few steps; a feeling of intense heat went through his leg and then he walked. When Theo asked to see the surgeon some days later, perhaps like some of you listening to this story, the Doctor found it hard to believe, but he could not deny the complex operation he had performed, nor could he deny the Xray he was now looking at that revealed everything was perfect, as if there had been no surgery. Theo Koulianos had clearly been healed.

Our first reading from Wisdom puts this into context: *Those who trust in him will understand, those who are faithful will live with him in love; for grace and mercy await those he has chosen.* Did we hear that? Those who trust **will** understand. Those who are faithful **will live** with him in love. Why? How? Because grace and mercy await those he has chosen. What was the truth that Paul placed before us: if you sow meagrely, then you cannot expect a rich harvest – thin sowing leads to thin reaping as all the gardeners among us know. Thin faith will equally manifest itself in a bland, ephemeral, mediocre discipleship.

In the Gospel Jesus reveals the intimate link between himself, the father and the gift of eternal life: *If anyone serves me, my Father will honour him.* When we begin, therefore, to place our experience, our life, under the power and authority of God’s transformative Word – rather than reduce God’s

Word to our limited experience and weak faith, then new perspectives open to us when we live in the power of His Word.

Fr Anthony asked Theo Koulianos a simple, yet fundamental question: “*Have you ever seen Jesus- if not, why not?*” God is not only able, but also wanting to fill each of us with every good thing, this is what Paul also said to us in the second reading today, so what are we waiting for? St Laurence, through faith in the sign of the cross, healed a blind man. He did not go to his death because he felt inspired by a collection of inspirational saying of a teacher from Nazareth who was clever with words. He was ready to surrender his life because he knew, not notionally, but experientially, he knew that the Trinity was active and present in every aspect of life.

Laurence had seen Jesus in action in the lives of the treasures of the Church that he courageously brought before the Prefect of Rome, therefore he knew that the cruel death that awaited himself was not the sad conclusion of a wasted hope, but rather the embracing of eternal love, a promise that had been inscribed within him. As Michael Koulianos at seven years of age felt and experienced. When Jesus shows up, things radically change.

Words from Pope Benedict in 2009 come to mind: “*The real problem at the moment of our history is that God is disappearing from the human horizon and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings with increasingly evident destructive effects.*”

The reality of the evangelistic task that we face today as disciples of Jesus is far closer to that of the early Church, of the Church of St Laurence than the Church of our grandparents. Pope Benedict writes: *In our days, when the vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel, the overriding priority is to make God present in this world and to show men and women the way to God.*”

To do this we need a faith filled proclamation of the Gospel, a proclamation of the Gospel that lives out of and from the conviction that transformation, healing, redemption are real possibilities, rather than pious slogans. A proclamation that initiates an encounter with the person of Jesus, rather than an overload of facts, details, words or arguments. This is why in *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict could boldly teach that our discipleship: “*...is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.*”

Laurence was more than willing to die for the saviour he had met and who had changed his life. He would gladly give his own life so that the person of Jesus might be evermore evident, worshiped and honoured. Perhaps Laurence would encourage us today to pray with eager faith for Jesus to show up and to be empower us. Then, perhaps like Laurence, we will be seeds that give life to much fruit, not simply orators to words and slogans.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

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