

Youth Service (I)

St George's Cathedral, Southwark 14th March 2004

Homily by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

I warmly welcome you here this evening: both the young and the young at heart. We gather in the season of Lent to focus on Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and to focus on him as he walks the way of the cross, as he treads the path that leads to his death. Now, as we come together tonight, we cannot but have in our minds the terrible images that have flashed across our television screens in the last few days, of the terrorist attacks in Spain. We pray tonight for the dead and the bereaved but I think it is important that we keep these images in our mind and bring them to the cross, bring them to the way of the cross. I also have another set of images in my mind this evening. Last Tuesday morning I went to the cinema. I don't often go to the cinema and I've never before been in the morning. In the audience, or congregation, there were quite a few clerical collars and many rather serious looking people. It was, of course, a preview of Mel Gibson's film, the Passion of Jesus Christ, which will be on general release later this month. It is a controversial film but a very powerful one. The images of Christ's brutal torture and crucifixion pass before your eyes in stark detail. Someone gave me a book of pictures of the film in which Mel Gibson gave his reasons for making it and he said that he wanted to make a film which would help people to "unforget". In other words, he wanted to make a film which would make people remember the passion and death of Christ. Like the great paintings of previous centuries, they put the story of Our Lord before us very vividly. And *we* come together tonight, during Lent, to remember together.

Members of other religions who come to this country are often shocked at the way we have forgotten our Christian story and forgotten our faith. The traditional way in which the Church has helped us to remember the passion and death of Christ is by the Stations of the Cross. You can see them on the walls of the Cathedral. Stations are stopping places. We pause and remember. And again I ask why is it so important to remember? Well, firstly, because Jesus is the Son of God. We cannot see God but if we contemplate Jesus Christ, especially in his suffering and death, we glimpse something of

the depth of God's love for us. To suffer for another is a sign of love. He died for us and as we look at the cross, as we look at the crucifix we can at least begin to glimpse the depth of God's love for us, and we draw nearer to Him. Secondly, following Christ on the road to the cross helps us to understand something of our own situation, our own calling in life. One thing that struck me most in the Mel Gibson film was the sense of purpose, of direction in Christ, the way he grasped hold of the destiny that was his, terrible though it was, and persevered, gave himself to what must happen to him. And this says something to us. Each of us is called in faith. By Baptism and Confirmation we're called to do something, to be something in God's plan and God's purposes. We're not alive for nothing: each of us has a destiny and a vocation: a place in God's purposes that only we can fulfil. And, of course, any life worth living will involve the cross, because any life worth living requires us to love others and to serve others, and that is costly. So, let us seek a true and authentic life.

Let me illustrate this by referring to a television programme I saw some time ago. It was a documentary by Michael Buerk about Ethiopia. Ten years ago Ethiopia had terrible drought and famine and Michael Buerk reported it in the news. Many of you will remember those extraordinary pictures of starving people sitting outside their tents in the blazing sun, waiting for relief, for water, for help. And they were people of great dignity and beauty. Michael Buerk followed the story of one man and his daughter who was seriously ill with malnutrition. They walked a long distance to a clinic run by some nuns and were advised that the little girl was too far gone. She would probably die quite soon. Now, in the documentary, Michael Buerk revisiting Ethiopia found the girl and her father. The girl had survived the famine and was an attractive young lady. But what struck me most of all was the father. He had a great sparkle in his eyes: you could see the joy of having his daughter still with him, though I presume he had lost other members of his family. And he kept saying: thank God that my daughter has survived. His faith had clearly sustained him,

and it was clear that even now he is living a very poor life, a precarious life. One drought year and there could be famine again. And at the end of the film Michael Buerk was reflecting on the tragic situation in Ethiopia. He said of the people that the government had let them down, the international community had let them down and their God had let them down. And suddenly I felt angry. I thought: you can't say that; that is an insult to that man, to his faith, to his interior life. That man's faith shone through and it was not for an outsider to assess or evaluate the significance or the reality of his faith or of the God in whom he believes.

That man had his place in God's purposes. So do each of you, to return to my earlier point. You all have a vocation. To say someone hasn't got a vocation is like saying they don't matter. It could be to priesthood, or some form of consecrated life, to marriage, to an important job, or a much more low-profile role. Whatever it is: if it is valuable it will involve self-denial. We're all called to love and serve one another, as that Ethiopian man loved his daughter: to love and to serve. So we can ask ourselves, how does God want me to serve? How can I love others? What gifts do I have to love and serve my fellow men and women? Am I prepared to love in a costly way? Or, when I use the word "love" is it more about what I want and what I need? The cross shows us the path and the pattern of true love. Let's contemplate Jesus Christ. On Saturday, 3rd April, at 8 p.m., there will be a dramatic version of the Stations of the Cross called: "Born for this". We can ask ourselves: what was I born for?