

Low Sunday, 8th April 2018

When you hear “St Pancras”, I am fairly sure of what you immediately think of: a Victorian railway station in London that is one of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture. Today, Low Sunday, we also think of St Pancras in connection with a ‘station’, though not a railway station but a station church: the church of San Pancrazio (St Pancras) in Rome. A little Latin can help us to explain why we use the word ‘station’ for both a church and something to do with railways: the word comes from the Latin *statio*, meaning a place where persons or things stay. We monks in fact still talk of the place where we gather before a procession as the *statio*; although in the case of the station church, the *statio* was where the procession ended and the people gathered for the Mass. Station Masses originally grew out of the early Christian practice in Rome of visiting the tombs of the martyrs and there to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice.

The church of St Pancras in Rome is dedicated to the martyr of the same name, who was beheaded in the first years of the fourth century at the age of just fourteen. I hope you don’t mind me mentioning monks again: but it was Pope St Gregory the Great who gave this church to some fellow monks and it was also he who sent relics of St Pancras with the monk St Augustine on his mission to evangelise England at the end of the sixth century. As a consequence, many ancient churches in this country are dedicated to the boy martyr, including St Pancras Old Church in London, after which the famous station is named: and so we have arrived back at the very place from which we started this little excursion!

It is perhaps interesting here to make a somewhat curious link with my brief homily on Palm Sunday. St Pancras Old Church, like the church that we are in now, has a Catholic composer buried in its graveyard. While we have Edward Elgar, they have (no, not Johann Sebastian Bach, whose *St Matthew Passion* and *St John Passion* I talked about two weeks ago, who wasn’t Catholic anyway, but rather his youngest son) Johann Christian Bach; variously referred to as ‘the London Bach’, ‘the English Bach’, or ‘the Catholic Bach’, having converted when he was studying in Italy.

But to get back again to St Pancras and today’s Station Mass! We read at the end of the Epistle: “He that believeth in the Son of God hath the testimony of God in himself (*Qui credit in Filium Dei, habet testimonium Dei in se*)” (1 Jn 5:10). St Pancras, the boy martyr, had this “testimony (*testimonium*)” within him. Observe here how the English and the Latin are alike, yet let me quote it for you in the original Greek: μαρτυρίαν (*martyrian*), and indeed his giving “testimony” led to his being a martyr. The theme of “testimony” is also found in St John’s Gospel and runs like a thread through the entire Gospel, presumably written by the same author as today’s Epistle.

Right at the beginning, in the Prologue, in the passage which we read for the Last Gospel at Mass, we hear that: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John (*Fuit homo missus a Deo, cui nomen erat Joannes*)" (Jn 1:6), not John the Evangelist himself though but the Baptist. And then that: "This man came for a witness, to give testimony of the light, that all men might believe through him (*Hic venit in testimonium ut testimonium perhiberet de lumine, ut omnes crederent per illum*)" (Jn 1:7). St John the Baptist indeed gave true "testimony", true "witness", μαρτυρίαν in other words, to Christ "the light", by his martyrdom, which (just like that of St Pancras) was by beheading.

In the Passion of our Lord according to John, proclaimed during the Solemn Liturgy on Good Friday, the Evangelist informs the listener, after the side of the Lord has been pierced with a spear: "he that saw it, hath given testimony, and his testimony is true. And he knoweth that he saith true; that you also may believe" (Jn 19:35). The purpose of the "testimony" of the Evangelist, just like that of the Baptist, was "that *all men* might believe": indeed, "that *you* also may believe". The theme of "believe" features even more heavily in St John's Gospel than "testimony", and in fact it could safely be said to be the main theme and purpose of the Gospel, which probably originally concluded with the last words from chapter twenty, and as such the very last words of today's Gospel: "But these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God: and that believing, you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31) (that, by the way, is not to say that chapter twenty-one was not written by the Evangelist, but rather that he probably added it at a later date).

And it is precisely the verb 'to believe' which lies at the heart of the Gospel of John: strangely enough the word 'faith' does not appear once in the whole Gospel! This might be because the noun 'faith' could be considered as being too static, or even abstract, in comparison to the activity and, in that sense, reality of the word 'to believe'. The apostle Thomas is described as believing because of the evidence, the testimony, before his eyes: the Risen Christ himself, with "his holy and glorious wounds" (prayer from the Easter Vigil). Although we have not had the same experience as St Thomas, we however experience various other types of testimony to Jesus being "the Christ, the Son of God" (Jn 20:31), such as those already mentioned: the witness of the martyrs and the written word of the inspired Scriptures.

Let us, therefore, believe and duly worship him, exclaiming: "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).