

St Peter's Church, Winchester Centenary Mass

Wednesday 15 July 2026

Your Excellency, Bishop Philip, brothers and sisters all.

Today we gather to celebrate the Feast of St Swithun, from the ninth century a patron of the Christian faith in this city. His shrine a great focus for pilgrims, he is still remembered for his charity and the strengthening of Christian life - even if he is not so good at forecasting the weather. Today we do well also to remember the Winchester Martyrs, patrons of this parish, laymen such as Ralph Milner, John Slade and John Bodley, together with Fr Roger Dickenson, who gave their lives for love of the Lord. And, of course, we gather to thank God for the hundred years of the life and faith of this Church of St Peter.

I borrow these next words: 'Today is a great hymn of faith and I am pleased to join my voice with yours in praising God and in strengthening the bonds of this ecclesial family'. I borrow them from Pope Leo, speaking a few weeks ago in Madrid, the home of our Apostolic Nuncio, as he celebrated with the diocesan family of that city. Pope Leo developed this image of music, saying that as a Church, as a parish, we are to learn and develop the 'art of polyphony', cooperating together with all our varied gifts, maintaining unity in diversity. He said: 'Our hearts must sing – that is, we must interpret events and situations by celebrating their meaning with others.' He continued, 'For the Church this occurs in a unique way through the liturgy, the great memorial of the events that saved us.'

And that is what we do today in this Mass of Thanksgiving. It is through Jesus Christ that we interpret, make sense of, our life, its origins and endings, its joys and sorrows, and in knowing that, far from being autonomous individuals, we belong to one another in this world and in the next.

In the Second Reading we have just heard, St Paul reminds us of the shape of this gift of faith. It comes as a 'following' – 'Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard.' It is a treasure: 'Guard the good deposit entrusted to you'. It is shared, for he speaks of the faithful witness of women and men 'able to teach others also.' So, today we thank God for all those who, in the course of these hundred years, have announced, expounded, kept safe the life of faith in this parish of St Peter. They are too many to name, but I take one exception in naming Canon, now Bishop, Peter Doyle, your former parish priest and, of course, I thank Fr Mark Hogan as the parish priest and all who assist him.

The gift of faith comes with a task, a responsibility: to put faith into practice, to share it, to proclaim the goodness of God in a thousand different ways, to be a Church in missionary mode.

Pope Leo uses three words to describe the tone, the music, of this mission, this work of putting faith into action. First, he says that the Gospel opens for us a pathway of hope. With faith in Jesus, he says, 'our sensibilities, backgrounds and priorities come together in Christ and draw their life from him, like the branches from the vine'. In this way our gifts of faith and hope

cease to be private but give shape to all our relationships, especially in times of conflict, resignation or even despair.

Then he says that this work is always marked by joy. By this he means not a fleeting emotion that comes and goes, but, in his words, 'a stable way of being, a deep sentiment that renews individuals, groups' and a parish community. He reminds us that to rejoice in the Lord is almost a command, for 'his life, death and resurrection have forever changed the perception of history for those who have encountered and followed him'.

Hope and joy are then joined by the third key characteristic of our mission: kindness.

Pope Leo says: 'Behold the music of the Gospel, with its compelling rhythm. When it reaches the heart, it makes people feel like they have been welcomed with open arms. Many are initially afraid to draw near, for they have heard of prejudices and disappointments. Kindness, even if it comes from just a few, can overcome the fear of many.'

And he makes this appeal: 'We must relearn the spiritual art of kindness, without which proclaiming the Gospel risks becoming impersonal and ineffective repetition, leaving room for frustration and mistrust.' Rather, we are to be, for everyone, like an open Bible: 'May the word of God be found in your faces and in your lives'.

As we celebrate this centenary, then, we are seeking the renewal of our faith and mission in hope, joy and kindness. We approach this task with great confidence as we recall the words of the First Reading, from the Prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me'. This gift of the Holy Spirit, given in baptism and confirmation, is given precisely for this mission of binding up wounds, of bringing a glimpse of freedom to the captives, of comfort and gladness for those who mourn and 'a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.' Our renewal and mission are the work of the Holy Spirit.

To live this mission, we have to be open, at home in the city, rather than confining ourselves within a group or environment where we feel safe and all sing the same tune. We have to become more aware, as Pope Leo teaches us, that truth goes before us, the Risen One goes before us and will already be present where we have not sought him. We are to seek out the goodness in others and find ways of cooperation and shared endeavours in our efforts to serve, as we like to say, the 'common good' – that is a good from which no-one is excluded.

Your parish newsletters are full of accounts of the many activities that take place here. They can all be spaces of mutual listening and discernment. If they are not, we risk each one going their own way and we may well fail to understand where the Lord wants us to be, what he expects of us, and what kind of conversion he is asking of us. But if they are places of exchange, then we can find the freshness of mission which is so needed today, becoming a place for all.

In all this we must keep in mind the one essential question that faces us all. It is the question put by the Lord to St Peter, in the Gospel today. It is the question put to each one of us without exception: 'Do you love me?'

As the Gospel text makes clear, this question comes before the mission. If we cannot truly say 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you' then there is little we can do with and for the Lord in his mission among us. Each time Peter says, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you' then he receives his mission: 'Feed my lambs', 'Feed my sheep'. So for us too. Love of the Lord is at the heart of our mission.

To love another person is to see them as they really are, to see their heart and soul, their true goodness, often not seen by others. To love Jesus is to see him as he really is. To know that he loves us is to know that he sees us as we really are. When that happens, slowly as it does, then pretence fades away, simplicity shines forth beyond all mere formality. We know the Lord and he knows us. We are at home with him and we can extend the same invitation to others.

As we reflect on this special centenary day may this be our resolve: that by knowing and loving Jesus more dearly, we may bring others to him, in hope and joy, in and through the Church.

Amen.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols