

HOLY SATURDAY 2025

You have never met Brian, and you sadly never will because he died at a tragically young age of 23, becoming one of the 42.2 million to have died of HIV/AIDS related illnesses since the pandemic began. Brian was one of a growing number of people who would come regularly to our monastery of Christ The Word in Zimbabwe for help. In his case, he came for help to pay for the anti-retroviral medication that would keep him alive, but sadly, it didn't. On his last visit he was far too weak to walk the 15 kilometres back to his village, a miracle that he had managed to arrive in the first place, so Br Placid and I took him by car as far as we could and then carried him the rest of the way.

Over the years we developed a simple rule that people could come to us for help, either for food, medication or assistance with school fees on any day of the week, except Sundays and overall, this little rule was kept, except in emergencies. We had just finished our Mass on Palm Sunday which had begun with a procession from the garden of the monastery at 8a.m. and made its way up to the mission Church and then the long Shona liturgy ending around 10.30am. Arriving back at the monastery to pray Terce I saw Brian waiting on the bench. I will be honest I was tired, hot and in no mood for Brian.

After praying Terce I went to see what he wanted, and I was trying to keep the irritation out of my voice when I asked him how I could help. "*Baba,*" he said with a smile, "*I need my money to go to the hospital tomorrow for my tablets.*" Why I asked him hadn't he come yesterday? With an innocent logic that only those who have lived and loved in Africa will appreciate he said smiling even more: "*But Baba, I didn't need the money yesterday, I need it today for tomorrow!*" Taking a deep breath, I went and retrieved the envelope with his 10 US dollars which was his lifeline and gave it to him and wished him a safe journey and gave him something to eat still trying to keep my irritation in check.

As I turned to go inside the monastery he said: "*Baba, people in my village say I should be dead because of this virus – they hate me.*" I stopped in my tracks and taking another deep breath, I turned and asked: "*So what do you say to them?*" His response was as clear as it was moving: "*I tell them Baba, I know I should be dead, but I know people who love Jesus, and they love me, so they give me life.*" With that he said thank you and began to eat the peanut butter and bread that I had given him. I sat with him until he had finished eating and drinking his glass of milk, knowing that I was in the presence of Jesus. The Word had become flesh for me again that day.

A saint that is very dear to the Russian people, St Seraphim of Sarov, used to say preaching is as easy as throwing stones from the top of a church tower, whereas putting it into practice is as hard as carrying stones to the top of the tower on your back. Friends, we have listened to the Word of God this evening in an extended way, a shared experience of lectio divina, in which God has retold us the story of His love from creation to the Gospel of the new creation in Jesus' resurrection. We have listened to a Word that is the only basis for our hope. God has spoken His eternal truth into our lives. He has enfolded us in His love.

I wonder if you felt His presence, the presence of the Holy Spirit hovering over us as we listened, hopefully not wondering how long this is going to take! In the General Instruction to the Missal, we are taught and should never forget:

“...when the Sacred Scriptures are read in Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel...”

Picking up on this truth Pope Benedict wrote: *“Christ does not speak in the past, but in the present, even as he is present in every liturgical action.”*

From the moment our liturgy began this evening with the blessing of the new fire, the lighting of the paschal candle, the singing of the Exsultet and the proclamation of the Word of Life in scripture; God has been revealing His radical love for us, in which the heart of God and the heart of every human being are enfolded in an eternal embrace of love. Friends, Jesus truly took light from heaven and brought it to the earth – the light of truth and the fire of love that transforms each and every one of us and each and every situation that we face. He brought the light, and now we know who God is and what God is like. Thus, we also know who we are and for what purpose we exist.

In a moment, in our renewal of our baptismal promises we will once again rekindle this light. Yes, I believe that the world and my life are not the product of chance but are created by God who has an eternal desire to share His life with us. Yes, I believe that in Jesus, the face of God has been revealed; that in him, God is present in our midst at this very moment. Yes, I believe that the Holy Spirit gives us the word of truth and enlightens our hearts; yes, I believe that in the communion of the Church we all become one Body with the Lord, and thus we encounter His resurrection and eternal life. This is the light of truth, this is the fire of His love: A powerful force coming from God, a force that does not destroy, but seeks to transform our hearts, so that we truly become men and women of God, and so that His peace, His hope His love can become active in this world.

This is Jubilee – this is our hope and only Jesus transmits this hope to us. That is why the Jubilee is not a calendar event but a lifestyle choice. We choose to live Jubilee hope because we live in the power of Him who is our hope. He is standing before us at this very moment. He has never taken his eyes off you and will never abandon you. His Word which is a medicine for our wounds – a real and powerful anti-retroviral – that counteracts the poison of the father of lies who wants to steal, kill and destroy any sense of hope. Jesus has spoken His word over you this evening to heal your perspective, to help you see things the way He does, and to live with clear vision eternally.

The light has come into our darkness. We see in a different way and therefore choose to love in a concrete manner. He stands before us now ready to renew us. We turn to Him, we repent of our sins and we become ambassadors of hope to others. As Brian beautifully preached: *“I know people who love Jesus, therefore I have hope.”* May that be true of each one of us.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

19 April 2025