

Lent 1 – 2023 – St Richard

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On Friday, the staff team here went to Chichester for a day of fellowship, prayer and planning as we begin the season of Lent. As part of our day there, we spent some time in the Cathedral exploring, amongst other things, the life and legacy of St Richard of Chichester, the patron saint of our Diocese and County.

And it struck me how different, how very counter cultural his story is when compared with our current and seemingly prevailing view of what makes for a good and special person.

Richard was an ascetic, someone who sought to live a simple, stripped back life, devoted to loving service over accumulating wealth. He, along with thousands of other medieval saints, took his cue from the early church mothers and fathers, the desert hermits who, following the example of Christ in this morning's reading, allowed themselves to be led by the spirit into the wild and inhospitable places of the world there to seek greater union with God.

Richard threw regular banquets to which he only invited the poor and needy, whilst he himself ate very little and was even a vegetarian way before it was cool. He travelled everywhere by foot, refusing to own or even ride a horse and spent much of his time walking the coastal paths and downland trails of Sussex, meeting and caring for the people whom he sought to serve.

He was also incredibly courageous and worked tirelessly to stamp out hypocrisy and exploitation. He forced his clergy to take their commitments to God and the church seriously, imposing harsh punishments for those who secretly married, or who sought to hold vast sums of wealth, or who simply didn't tend their flocks to a high enough standard.

He even regularly called out Knights and nobles (the celebrities of their day) forcing them to confront their abuse of power with extreme and humiliating penances, in fact, he was so hated by the powerful that King John suspended the see of Chichester for 2 years in the hopes of getting rid of the troublesome Bishop – he did not succeed.

All this and more meant that upon Richard's death, his tomb at Chichester Cathedral quickly became a hugely significant place of pilgrimage, rivalled only in southern England by Thomas a Becket's shrine in Canterbury. Thousands of ordinary people took the costly and perilous journey to St Richard's tomb, drawn there by tales of a good and holy man who stood up for the poor over and against the powerful, and whose simple life of service and self-sacrifice bore witness to the love of God and the action of the Holy Spirit in the county of Sussex.

Now, you might argue that Richard still embodies virtues that our society holds dear today, and that I'm being far too doom and gloom, even for the 1st week of Lent. Well, I hope you're right, in fact I'm sure you are, to a degree, but I couldn't help but draw a comparison with another figure who I'd been forced to think about this week, a man called Andrew Tate.

Tate is a kickboxer and social media influencer who describes himself as a success coach. His social media output is currently having such an enormous impact upon young people (particularly boys) that many schools are choosing to send home warning letters to parents about the risk his content poses to their child's safety, whilst some have even hastily drawn up entire lessons and schemes of work designed to combat Tate's influence.

He encourages young men (who he refers to as his army) to take whatever they want, whenever they want it, with force if necessary. He tells them that the way to get ahead is to be concerned only with their own needs and desires. He jokes of beating women and threatening them with machetes, he says rape victims are responsible for their own abuse, that mental illness isn't real and people with depression are just weak and don't deserve to live, and he has 11 billion views on TikTok.

He's currently under arrest for organising trafficking, rape and exploitation gangs and yet he is one of the most popular celebrities in our society with many senior teachers warning that our children are at real risk of being taken in by his particularly vile brand of misogyny.

The gulf then between St Richard and Tate couldn't be any greater and I fear that this phenomenon highlights a terrifying shift in the values of our society. Of course, there have always been men like Tate, who abuse their power and position to exploit and dominate, men

who have treated women as objects to be used and discarded, but these men were not usually idolised, at least not for their predatory behaviour anyway.

No, for centuries we've held saints like Richard up as, exemplars of all we aspire to be. Or folk heroes' like Robin Hood, who Tate would no doubt deride as weak and pathetic as he posts yet another video of himself sat atop piles of ill-gotten cash.

And as I thought about St Richard and Tate in light of this morning's gospel, I thought of the devil and how what he offers Jesus is exactly the same as Tate offers his followers – power, prestige, influence, control, the immediate cessation of all bodily needs at any expense.

And Tate isn't the only one, he's certainly the most odious, but he's part of a growing movement of online celebrity built upon selling people, especially young people, the lie that all that matters is themselves.

That as long as they put themselves first and attend only to their own needs and desires, whether that be through Tate style hustling and coercion, or a softer, pseudo spiritual notion of manifesting destiny, or of dieting, or investing, or collecting or whatever, that this will make them happy, that this will finally fill the void in their life, will quieten the fear, calm the anxiety, give them the meaning and purpose they've been longing for.

Now, I'm not claiming that Tate or any of these influencers are somehow demonic, but rather, that they've bought wholesale into the temptation of evil and so have severed themselves from all ties and commitments that don't serve their own personal desires, leading to the growth and propagation of a dangerously toxic and corrosive worldview.

But St Richard knew, as did our Lord, that the devil is a liar. That there is no true contentment in the pursuit of the individual, but only in the building up of community, in greater relationship with God and with one another. And so, we to must confront the lies and falsehoods of Satan, the evil that seduces and corrupts in the name of personal success.

For, just like Richard, we know that success is not measured by what we own or achieve, but by how we love, not by our standing in society, but by our commitment to community, not by the building up of wealth but by our dedication to the building of God's kingdom, where the few will not extort lives of luxury through the exploitation of the many and where women and girls need not live in fear of violence at the hands of weak and wretched men.

Our commitment to God's kingdom, to the community of all creation must come first, just as Jesus refused to put himself above the community of the trinity - he was led into the wilderness by God the Holy Spirit to grow in communion with God the father, and so in turn God the Son would not be tempted by the devil.

Lent, and the idea of fasting, or taking something up, or indeed doing anything motivated by something greater than one's immediate, personal gratification, like St Richard, feels increasingly countercultural.

Some twee relic of a bygone age, an age of story book heroes and the fantastical lives of saints and legends. But that is why it is more important than ever that we seek to embrace its redemptive power, to reclaim Lent not as a time where we Christians choose to suffer out of some misguided masochism, but where we boldly, and decisively choose the way of life over the lies of the devil. Where we regroup ourselves in our bodies, in our communities and focus on how we can better love and serve one another so that we all might grow in peace and happiness, together, as one family under God.

This is our story, it's an old one, the oldest in fact, and it seems that it is being forgotten – let's use this Lenten period then, this next few weeks to commit ourselves to its retelling, and let's seek to lead lives which counter the false narrative of personal success and instant gratification with the truth of loving community and eternal contentment.

Amen