

29th Sunday (B)

18th October 2015

'Canonized couple'

Is 53: *by His sufferings shall my servant justify many
looks on those who revere Him ... to rescue their souls from death*

Ps 32: *The Lord*

Heb 4: *a high priest ...who has been tempted in every way that we are ...*

Mk 10: 35–45: *anyone who wants to become great among you must be your
servant*

The year 1858 was an extraordinary year in the life of the Church in France. I say this because it was both the year of the 18 apparitions to St Bernadette in Lourdes (February to July) and then, in July, at almost exactly the same time as the last apparition took place in Lourdes, it was the wedding day of Louis and Zélie Martin. Whilst you have almost certainly heard of St Bernadette, it's likely that you might not have heard of Louis and Zélie Martin ... but they were the parents of St Thérèse of Lisieux, the Carmelite saint who died at 24, who is known the world over, and whom in the Church we affectionately call "the little flower."

Today (Sunday 18th) this couple, the parents of St Thérèse, will be canonized (declared to be saints in heaven) by Pope Francis at Mass in St Peter's Square. This is the first time ever, in the Church, that a husband and wife are simultaneously declared saints — and what

better time could it come than during the Church's Synod on Marriage and Family Life? They were indeed a model of marriage and family life, and to have this celebration of their canonization at the heart of this current Synod of Bishops is an encouraging and beautiful sign.

But when I say that they were a model couple — and a model family — now raised to the status of saints, that's not to portray them as superhuman, or plaster-cast statues, to whom we cannot relate. No — they lived a life in the context that many of us live it, with the pressures, joys, and sorrows that most of us have. They were married when Louis was 34 and Zélie was 26. They each had their skilled professions: he was a watch-maker, and she was a fine lace-maker; they were comfortably off, and previous generations on both sides of the family had had much experience of the military. Both sides of the family had also been faithful to the Church. In the preceding half a century there had been huge upheavals in France with the French Revolution, and a great persecution of the Church and of priests. But Louis's family, and Zélie's family, had remained devout Catholics all the way through the persecutions. They met, by chance, on a bridge in Alençon, the town they lived in, and within three months of meeting were married.

Just as any family might have, they had joys and sorrows: they had the joy of many children — 7 daughters and 2 sons — but the acute sorrow of seeing 4 of them die as small children. St Thérèse was the youngest of their children, born when Zélie was 41, and at first she was not at all a well baby, but she was nursed back to health. However, her mother Zélie was by this time not well herself, suffering inoperable breast cancer. Zélie died at the age of only 45, leaving Louis to care for five daughters, aged from 4 to 17. He moved to Lisieux, and cared for his daughters who one by one entered the religious life. St Thérèse entered Carmel at the age of only 15; but others of her sisters remained with her father until he died at the age of 70, and only entered the convent afterwards.

We have listened to the words of Jesus this evening/morning in the Gospel: Jesus will not promise James and John special places of honour in the Kingdom: instead, He will only promise them the hardship of being apostles and martyrs! Just as St Thérèse knew, it is through a ‘little way’ and not by way of greatness that we will win through to heaven. Heaven is achieved by doing the ordinary things of a simple life out of a basic and

faithful love which is in its own little way heroic. Looking after one’s family; praying; coming to Mass; caring for one’s neighbour ... it is through these simple acts of kindness to God and to one another that patiently and humbly we will be saved. This is just what Louis and Zélie Martin taught their children: they were told to “make jewels for their heavenly crown” by offering little sacrifices for love of Jesus.

I want to conclude with the words with which the CTS booklet on Saints Louis and Zélie Martin ends:

Conclusion

Some people might think that this holy couple are being considered for canonization simply because they were the parents of St Thérèse; ignoring the fact that Thérèse achieved sanctity because she was the daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin. Others might say that they did nothing special. They were born, worked at their own trade, met, fell in love, married and had children. Nothing more than you could do. That is just the point. Instead of doing one or two outstanding things, they did very many little things very well. In other words they lived what Thérèse would describe as her ‘Little Way to Heaven’. But it was not she who taught them this ‘Little Way’. It was they who taught her!