

New Brighton, Sunday 29th January 2023

Feast of St Francis de Sales

4th Sunday after Epiphany

« Il n’y a pas plus de différence entre l’Evangile écrit et la vie des saints qu’entre une musique notée et une musique chantée »¹

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“There is no more difference between the Gospel and the life of the Saints, than between a musical score, and the music being sung.”

This very sentence could apply to all the saints who are praising God and watching us from heaven, but today it resounds in a peculiar way for the author himself of that little word, St Francis de Sales.

“He was sent, then, as a living image of Jesus, opening his arms and calling sinners to repentance, the victim of heresy to truth, the just to perfection, and all men to confidence and love. The Holy Ghost had rested on him with all his divine power and sweetness.”²

At a time of trouble in the history of the Church, as the newly born protestant heresy was dragging away lots of Christians out of the catholic faith of their baptism, St Francis de Sales was given to the Church to preach the good word of the Gospel across his motherland, Savoy. Sent by his bishop, he brought back several heretics to catholic faith. His tireless work only ended with his final rest, when the Lord called him back home, 400 years ago, on the 28th of December 1622. He could truly say about him the same words the Apostles of the Gentiles sent to his disciple Timothy:

“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”³

Fortunately, we know some the last words our Saint gave us as his last will, and they look similar, at least in the intention of our saint to always fulfil God’s will and to correspond to his divine love at all time:

¹ St Francis de Sales, Letter to Archbishop Frémyot, 1604

² Dom Guéranger, Liturgical Year, 29th January, St Francis de Sales

³ 2 Tim., IV, 6-8

“O Lord, all my desires are in front of you, and I do not hide the whine of my sufferings. You are my God and everything I love. My desire is the desire of the eternal hills.”⁴

All along his life, St Francis de Sales put into actions the charity he was preaching without taking a rest. Throughout his words, his letters, his books, his preaching, his actions, he was showing the eternal way of salvation, with the constant practice of charity towards all. The words of the Apostle from his Epistle to the Corinthians was not a vain one to him:

“Charity never fails. [...] And now these three remain: Faith, Hope and Charity. But the greatest of these is Charity”⁵

The Doctor of the Love of God urged all people to practice constantly that virtue, but never forget to teach Humility in the meantime, as all virtues and good actions rely on our dependence to God’s grace, and therefore, the acknowledgement of our weakness and unworthiness in receiving these gifts from the Lord. He wanted holiness for everyone, and perfection in that holiness:

“St Francis de Sales used to say, "I hear of nothing but perfection on every side, so far as talk goes, but I see very few people who really practise it. Everybody has his own notion of perfection. One man thinks that it lies in the cut of his clothes, another in fasting, a third in almsgiving, or in frequenting the Sacraments, in meditation, in some special gift of contemplation, or in extraordinary gifts or graces; but they are all mistaken, as it seems to me, because they confuse the means, or the results, with the cause.””⁶

Let’s listen to the great teaching of our Patron saint this morning, and withdraw from our meditation upon his life, the grace to patiently, faithfully, humbly demonstrate to our God Saviour and Redeemer that our only true and real desire is to follow him, receive the word of the Gospel, and put it into action in our own life. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”⁷ and there will be no longer any difference between the words of the Gospel, and your own life, entirely dedicated and consecrated to God, according to your state of life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁴ Msgr Trochu, St Francois de Sales, Vol. 2, Ch XLIV, la dernière maladie et la mort

⁵ 1 Cor., XIII, 8, 13

⁶ Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, The spirit of S. Francis de Sales, Bishop and Prince of Geneva, Ch. I, 1

⁷ Mt., V, 48