

GOD'S HAPPY WARRIOR

WORDS SPOKEN AT THE REQUIEM MASS FOR FATHER VINCENT McNABB
AT ST. DOMINIC'S PRIORY, LONDON, ON JUNE 21ST, 1943, BY THE VERY
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You are the light of the world. A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but upon a candlestick, that it may shine to all that are in the house. So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your father who is in heaven (MATTHEW, v, 14-16).

'You are the light of the world,' says our Lord to his disciples; and again, 'I am the Light of the world' (John viii, 12). If the world then is to be truly enlightened, these two lights, Master and disciple, must be one; they must glow with a single light and burn with a single flame. The apostle who bears the gospel-message must strive by life and teaching to identify himself with the Lord who sends him.

'Let your light shine before men that they may glorify your Father who is in heaven.' These words provide a clue to the life-secret of him whose going leaves a heavy burden of sorrow on our hearts—a sorrow not for him, who has gone to his well-earned rest and rich reward, but for ourselves who have lost him for a time and will surely never in this world see his like again. You knew him and what he was; but there must be many who were puzzled and even astonished at this strange figure walking our streets and appearing to be a visitor from another century who had strayed into our modern world. He was a Friar Preacher; and a Friar Preacher, according to the terms of the contract he makes on the day of his religious profession, exists solely to seek God's glory by working for the salvation of mankind. He serves this end chiefly by teaching and defending the Catholic faith: the means he employs are prayer, study and preaching. For more than fifty years Fr. Vincent McNabb unceasingly and unswervingly followed that glorious ideal with all the devotion of his energetic mind, with all the love of his generous heart and soul and with a zeal unparalleled in the history of our Order in this land. With an almost literal exactness he has worthily followed that sublime vocation, walk-

ing so surely in the footsteps of his holy father St. Dominic that he seemed to be a medieval friar come alive in our midst. His was an unusual life—admirable and, according to twentieth century standards, astonishing and even disconcerting, eccentric, some will say; but remember ‘eccentric’ is a relative term: it depends where you place your circle or fix your centre. To place the centre in God and God’s eternal truth and glory is clearly to put oneself out of joint with some of the elements of a world that forgets or ignores God or even denies his existence altogether. But Fr. Vincent was not, from his side, a misfit in modern life or out of joint with the world. There is a true love of the world as there is a false. God so loved the world as to send us his Son. Fr. Vincent loved his fellow men with a true supernatural charity. Faithful to the Rule of his Order, he gave the whole strength of his body, the vigour of his mind and the zeal of his soul to the work of teaching the truth and dispensing the mysteries of God. He loved to quote our Lord’s words, ‘For them do I sanctify myself.’ His own spiritual life was an instrument for bringing the spiritual life to others. He preached in churches and in the open places, he lectured, wrote, toiled in the confessional, laboured and spent himself to communicate God and his salvation to the people. Thousands knew him: everyone seems to have heard of him; but we, his brethren, who claim to have known him well, can testify solemnly here in your presence and in the presence of the silent Witness in the tabernacle to his marvellous holiness and unblemished life. You saw his external activity, but we were privileged to get glimpses of the pure fountain from which all that activity sprang. The utter self-abnegation, the rigid asceticism, the complete unselfishness, that chair in his room on which he never sat (he always either knelt or stood), that bed on which he never rested—all these are things too sacred and intimate to dwell upon. If all this presents a grim and repellant picture to your imagination, dismiss it at once: he was the happiest, most light-hearted, least depressed member of the community, and he was the life and soul of merriment when the time for recreation came. Renunciation for him meant forgoing the lesser joys for the sake of the supreme and only real joy.

Yet whatever we may think we know of his virtues, it can be said of him as was said of St. Dominic that his true greatness is known to God alone. He was indeed a true and worthy son of St. Dominic and he provides in our own time one more fulfilment of Pope Honorius III’s prophecy that the Friars of

Dominic would be champions of the faith and true lights of the world.

Fr. Vincent's own industry sharpened and brightened the keen and lucid mind that nature had given him. All his life long he was a student who could marvellously combine close concentration upon study and thought with external active work. He was a true apostle whose Christ-like labours were the outflow and overflow of a mind intent on God. He gloried in the title, given him by his Order, of Master of Sacred Theology. Theology, the queen of the sciences, for him meant the Faith, the Holy Scriptures, God-made-man, the Church; it meant his beloved St. Thomas Aquinas. There were just about four books in his cell, apart from his files of copious notes—a Bible, a Breviary, the Dominican Constitutions and the *Summa* of St. Thomas. His many students will remember his inspiring and stimulating lectures, and how he always reminded us that he was a theologian and that we too should aspire to this highest of titles by loving to interest ourselves in God.

The cause of God was his consuming passion—the glory, the justice, the truth of God—and he defended that cause with a life-long devotion, singleness of purpose, a lack of human respect and, we dare to add, with the fighting spirit of a crusader. When he was dying he said: 'I must not take death lying down.' It was not his way to take anything lying down, but when it was a question of God's rights and God's honour, then he must stand up as God's champion. He would have gloried in martyrdom.

During the last war he stood up for wronged and violated Belgium, by his own efforts initiated appeals and added considerably to the funds for Belgian Relief. He took a sincere and simple joy in the decoration which was sent to him by the King of the Belgians. This little emblem was among the few things he retained among his minute stock of personal belongings, and it was one of the last articles—that and his Master's ring—which he handed over to his superior before he died.

His own poverty, which seemed to the onlooker complete and even stark, helped him to understand and love the poor. 'Blessed are the poor,' 'To the poor the gospel is preached,' were inspired sayings he strove to make real in his own life, in his words and in his deeds. His defence of the papal Encyclicals preaching social justice was life-long. He would inveigh against abuses and evils, against the tyranny of wealth, the idolatry of the State, the deadness and degradation that

come with modern industrialism with all the fierce zeal of a Savonarola, yet never was he known in public or in private to give voice to any uncharitable judgement of any person. He attacked evils and wrongs—not persons. His brethren will bear witness to the same amazing charity within the circle of his religious family. To a man whom nature had given a rock-like resoluteness and a certain stubborn inflexibility of character, and who was by temperament explosive and vehement, that is no small tribute. It is proof of a self-possession and a practised discipline, the fruits of grace rather than of nature. An argument with him—and he could be terrible in argument—would end like the miraculous calming of a tempest: the sun would come out and all would be as if nothing had ruffled the waters. He solemnly assured me when dying, ‘I have no enemies.’

The Church’s apostolate is Catholic—universal, a clamorous appeal, a summons to the *whole* world. *Verbum Dei non est alligatum*. Fr. Vincent’s life and preaching were in the true tradition of this universal appeal; witness his ready sympathy with those who work and pray for the unity of Christendom, his tender charity towards Anglicans and non-conformists, his work among the Jews, his friendly discussions with agnostics and atheists; his eager enthusiasm for any attempt to bring better social conditions into the lives of the people or to induce town-dwellers to settle on the land. This universal apostolate is summed up and symbolised by the striking picture, so familiar to many of us, of the Preaching Friar, gaunt and rugged, standing on the rostrum at Parliament Hill or Marble Arch. When the Catholic Evidence Guild is given a patron saint it will be such a one as he.

People have been asking me what were Father Vincent’s last words.

I will tell you what were among the last four things he did—all true to the character of the man.

(1). He sang the *Nunc Dimittis* in a strong, clear voice—‘Now thou dost dismiss, O Lord, thy servant in peace.’ He explained that Dead Marches are all gloom, and he desired to face death with cheerfulness and joy.

(2). He made his Confession and did for the last time what he had done every week of his life since he was seven years old.

(3). He renewed his vows, putting his hands in mine, and he thus confirmed that solemn dedication of his life to God

made in early youth, now ratified almost in his dying breath after the faithful service of more than half a century.

(4). And lastly he repeated more than once those words spoken by his beloved St. Peter to the Risen Christ, 'Lord, thou knowest all things: thou knowest if I love thee.' These words he desired should be inscribed in Greek and in black characters on his coffin, and he gave minute instructions to Father Donald Proudman how it was to be done. The words might have been the motto of his life: they reveal the glorious ideal by which he lived. All that he said, all that he did, all that he was were the expression of his burning love for his Master, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thank God for Father Vincent. He was a great Friar Preacher, but he was something more: he was a living sermon. And God grant we may show our gratitude for such a gift by striving to take to heart the lessons he taught us by his life and by his death. God grant we live with something of his love for our Lord and die with his unconquerable courage, that we may by our lives give glory to our Father who is in heaven. *May his soul rest in peace.*

TO THE UNDYING MEMORY

It was long a commonplace that the world knew nothing of its greatest men. Now that saying was already current a life-time ago. It is emphatically true to-day, and its value and meaning affect us at the present moment more than ever they did in the past, for this is a moment when men are only publicly known by their names, and when the real personality for which the name stands is hidden under a mass of popular print.

Father Vincent McNabb, the Dominican, who has just passed to his reward, intensely illustrates all this. The greatness of his character, of his learning, his experience, and, above all, his judgement, was something altogether separate from the world about him. Those who knew him marvelled increasingly at every aspect of that personality. But the most remarkable aspect of all was the character