

Laurence the deacon was a great man in the church of Rome; there were many priests there, but only seven deacons; and their competence covered all the practical matters, including the administration of money.

The story says that when persecution of the church was very fierce, and the city prefect was about to seize the church's property, Laurence distributed everything he could lay his hands on the poor of Rome. When the police arrived, there was nothing left except the grateful crowds of the poorest people.

Laurence's sensational death -by being grilled alive -was followed by a tremendous cult; there are more churches dedicated to him in Italy, after Peter and Paul, than any other saint: and the mediaeval missals have nine separate masses for him. If we want to know why this is, we should think of the fact that saintliness shines brightest when it draws a line between giving and suffering. Clever scholars write huge volumes on the mystery of suffering. Ordinary people have a simple knowledge that if you love, you will suffer, and if you love very much, you will die. They know that the hatred of the world is especially directed against anyone who lives in love.

Jesus knew this too, and the knowledge of it lies behind the whole Gospel. When we heard his fierce rebuke of Peter the other day, he was defending himself from the polite fiction that you can love and survive. *Heaven preserve you*, said Peter, as if God himself might not know the consequences of love on the earth he made. Peter lived on in the vain hope that he would one day save Jesus from the Cross. It wasn't until he had crashed out of the passion in bitter tears that Peter finally abandoned his project, and let Jesus save him.

Laurence showed the Roman Church that the same pattern could be followed out by anyone, and it is one thing to say that, and quite another thing to do it. That is why Laurence was not forgotten, despite the fact that no-one can remember the name of the City Prefect.