

**SHORT SERMON TO ST JOHN'S BEN RHYDDING, ILKLEY BY
REV. BRIAN GREGORY ON THE OCCASION OF THE VISIT OF PUIU &
DORINA TARCEA 21 NOVEMBER 2010**

I'd like to pick up on something Puiu said just then. 'God healed our hearts,' he said, 'and taught us to cherish his will.' That is Kingdom language – healing of the heart, cherishing of God's will – this is the vocabulary of Christ the King.

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I would say that the work of the congregation here at St John's, in the way it gives to, in the way it prays for and in the way it encourages Pro Prietenia, is work for the Kingdom of God. I have seen it at work over ten years and I believe in it.

I would say that the work of our little charity, The Friendship Foundation here in Britain, acting, amongst other things, as a channel between the generosity of St John's in Ben Rhydding and Pro Prietenia's commitment in Arad, I would say it is work for the Kingdom of God. I, and our four other trustees Bob Tilley and your own Dorothy Tait, John Sheen and Jeff Paget, are passionate for this work and I believe in all this.

In the Gospel reading for 'Christ the King' we hear that when Pilate crucified Jesus he insulted the Jews one last time by fastening a notice to the cross, written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." They objected, of course: "Don't write 'The king of the Jews,' but, rather, that this man *claimed* to be king of the Jews." It was too late: "What I have written, I have written," said Pilate.

Here on the cross, between two common criminals, we see Jesus continuing to associate with the despised and the disreputable. Poignantly, the second thief pleaded, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’

He must have believed, not only that Jesus was a king, but that he would survive the cross and ‘come into’ his kingdom. By asking to be remembered he was asking to be part of that kingdom.

In the Lord’s Prayer we, too, ask the same for ourselves: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

In the kingdom of God, the lower instincts of human kind are radically reversed: peacemaking instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than subjugation, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed, humility rather than haughtiness, inclusion rather than exclusion, human dignity rather than contempt. These are sublime qualities of the Kingdom of God and their propagation and growth is a work for that Kingdom.

Human dignity, for instance – a person’s innate right to respect and ethical treatment – human dignity is, at one level, what the kingdom of God here and now is all about. On 4th May this year we were one of just two or three charities invited to the Romanian Parliament in Bucharest. We were invited for the inauguration of the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Human Dignity. In the massive committee room built to house Ceaucescu’s inner cabinet, and now wonderfully renamed ‘the Chamber of Human Rights,’ we witnessed the politicians signing the Universal Declaration of Human Dignity. Then I received the tremendous privilege of delivering a short address to the politicians and international guests gathered there in the People’s Palace.

I spoke as the Chairman of the small British charity which had its genesis here at St John’s a decade before (Whoever would have believed this could be possible in

those early days in Ben Rhydding?) I spoke, too, as vice-president of Pro Prietenia in Romania. (again, whoever could have imagined what Puiu would achieve when he set his mind to the task here in Ben Rhydding some ten years ago?).

My address was entitled: 'The role of charities in the matter of Human Dignity.' I wanted it to be a speech about the kingdom and I trust it was. I spoke about the restoration of the image of God in people who are damaged, marginalized, disadvantaged, broken and fragmented, and the role of charities in this work of restoration.

I mentioned how, within the partnership of The Friendship Foundation in the UK and Pro Prietenia in Romania, three-years ago we started an exchange programme for youth from our two countries. In its second year the project received funding from the EU. This year we missed out on funding, but we are still planning for a much-enlarged exchange to also include the Republic of Moldova, Poland and the Netherlands. Exchange programmes always bring some benefit, but our particular programme benefits young people who are damaged by disadvantage, and goes some way to restoring their human dignity.

In a different sphere, I mentioned how our charities are working together to benefit victims of crime in Romania. How we help make victims aware of their human rights in law, but we go further, and through counselling and acts of kindness, restore their human dignity. To this end, we now have a relationship with the Victim Support charity in Great Britain with its 35 years experience in the field.

I reminded the listeners that one of the gravest affronts to human dignity in modern times has to be that of human trafficking, one of the world's fastest-growing crimes. I mentioned how, here too, there is an important role to be played by charities: in providing a neutrality - which is important for those who have

cause to fear the authorities - in providing sanctuary, in providing possible repatriation and, importantly, the means of restoring human dignity to broken lives. In this, charities from different countries do well to work together, possibly in some form of recognisable international network.

So it is that Pro Prietenia currently has a professional social worker on a month's internship in Italy studying the provision there for victims of human trafficking. So it is that next Monday Puiu, Dorina and I will meet with the Poppy Project in London – they work with female victims of human trafficking in this country. So it is that on the same day we meet with the Head of Consular affairs at the Romanian Embassy on the same subject.

In ten years we have come a long, long way, Praise God. But Romania still has some of the highest levels of poverty in Europe and its needs and opportunities are a great challenge to her people. Many of these opportunities are best met by indigenous charities such as Pro Prietenia which, please God, you will continue to support for as long as the need exists.

Find out more at next Wednesday's presentation here in the Lounge at 7.30pm for eight. Or, if you can't make that, pop over to our place at 9 Strawberry Street, Silsden on Tuesday for an informal chat with Puiu and Dorina any time from 7pm onwards.

“Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” prayed the penitent thief; but it is our prayer, too. Indeed, it may be the most important prayer that we pray. Like the thief crucified beside Jesus, we pray that we may, for ever, be a part of the great kingdom he is building in this world and the next.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

(BG)