

St. Elizabeth of Hungary

Wednesday 18th November

Today, we celebrate the feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary.

By way of introduction to Elizabeth, let us begin with something that Archbishop Desmond Tutu, wrote in his book "God Has a Dream". He said this – *"Just as we are all meant to be contemplatives and to hear the voice of God in our lives, we are all meant to answer God's call to be his partners in transfiguring the world. This calling, this encounter with God, is always to send us into the midst of human suffering."*

This calling to both contemplation and to action was embodied in the person of Elizabeth of Hungary who was born in the year 1207 to King Andrew II of Hungary and his wife Gertrude, and she died only 24 short years later in the German city of Marburg.

At the age of four, Elizabeth was taken away from her family and sent to live in the Castle of Wartburg in Thuringia (*i.e. part of Germany*) to live with the family of Landgrave Hermann where she learned to pray as she was being groomed to marry the eldest son of the Landgrave family, also named Hermann.

Sadly, Elizabeth's intended husband, Hermann, died before the two of them could marry.

So as not to waste the years of preparation for the proposed alliance between Hungary and Thuringia, Elizabeth was then married to Hermann's brother, Ludwig, whom, it seems, she actually preferred. Elizabeth at that time was a mere 14 years old; Ludwig was 21. And by all accounts they genuinely loved one another and were happy.

During the next six years, they had three children together. This period was not, however, always easy. In the Spring of the year 1226 when floods and famine and the pest wrought havoc to Thuringia, and while Ludwig was away in Italy on imperial business, Elizabeth assumed control of affairs at home and began distributing alms in all parts of the territory, even giving away state robes and ornaments in order to feed the poor. She also built a hospital which she visited regularly, and was famed for her gentleness and compassion as a champion – and servant of the poor.

But, such generosity only aroused the antagonism of the court and of her husband's family, and when Ludwig died in 1227 while away on state business, Elizabeth, who was then 20 years old, left the castle, and as a widow, used much of the money she was allotted by law to help the poor, and under the strict spiritual directorship of Conrad of Marburg (*an inquisitor in Heresy trials*) she renounced the world and became a Third Order Franciscan.

In 1128, she built the Franciscan hospital at Marburg where, until the end of her life three years later, she devoted herself entirely to the care of the sick, especially to those afflicted with the most loathsome and awful diseases.

At the age of 24, Elizabeth, exhausted by life, died, after a truly remarkable yet tragic existence.

We often think that God's plans for us are pre-ordained and static, but this way of thinking is not helpful. Like Elizabeth, we need to recognise the freedom we have to use our talents for the good of all, and acknowledge God as our friend and companion on the journey of life

During Advent, as we contemplate of the coming of Christ at the end of time, we may see Elizabeth as an example – a kind of icon to model ourselves on.

At difficult times in her life, Elizabeth did not bewail her loss, but threw herself into the loving arms of God, and spent her life caring for others who were suffering and in need.

Elizabeth understood and lived those words of Archbishop Tutu – *"we are all meant to answer God's call to be his partners in transfiguring the world. This calling, this encounter with God, is always to send us into the midst of human suffering"*.

Every Blessing June