

CHRISTMAS 2020

REFLECTIONS

Christmas Homily

I ALWAYS keep an eye on what is happening at Howton Grove, the Monastery to which the Sisters who lived at the Presbytery moved a few years ago. They have an electronic ministry which benefits people far and wide – Google iBenedictines to discover it – and their blog recently dealt with the subject of Christmas trees. Christmas trees have been on my mind a bit because, this year, I was involved for the first time in us getting a tree for Church. Why, I wondered, do we have to have one? Why do we all drag a fir tree – real or artificial - into our living rooms?

The Sisters at Howton Grove were fairly indifferent to Christmas trees until someone drew their attention to a new layer of symbolism. I myself had got as far as working out that the evergreen branches of the Christmas fir, in winter, are a sign that there is life and growth in the midst of desolation. And that this tree balances with, and corresponds to, the bare branches of the Cross, the dead tree on which the Saviour of the World was crucified in the springtime of the year. Both trees – the living tree in winter and the dead tree in spring – remind us of mentions of the tree of Paradise in the Book of Genesis, the tree of life, which gave immortality, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with its forbidden fruit, which brought about the Fall.

What the iBenedictine Sisters' blog drew to my attention – and was new to me – was a possible link between the Christmas tree and the Burning Bush. We remember the story:

3 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Mid'ian; ...and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of

a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed... ⁴ ... God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here am I.' ⁵ Then he said, 'Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶ And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. *Ex 3*

God is there in the flame of fire in the midst of a bush, a living flame which doesn't destroy the bush. The Sisters' blog invites us to see a connection between the burning bush and the Christmas tree.

The Sisters reflect on possible links between the burning bush, the Christmas tree, and Our Lady:

...once one begins considering the idea, it becomes more and more entrancing. The fresh greenery, illuminated with points of light, the gracious bending under the weight of a stylized fruitfulness, there is more here to meditate on than meets the eye. It can indeed be an image of the Burning Bush and hence of Mary and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Search the thousands of liturgical texts and you quickly discover that there is nothing new under the sun. And so, on 1st January, the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, the Church prays this during Vespers:

Moses saw the thornbush which was on fire yet was not burnt up. In it we see a sign of your virginity which all must honour; Mother of God pray for us.

Meanwhile, as the Benedictine Sisters who used to live here, discovered, there is an exotic and explicit link between the Burning Bush and Mary giving birth to the Saviour, in the following words, used in a hymn of the Coptic – that is, Egyptian – Orthodox Church.

**The burning bush seen by Moses
the prophet in the wilderness**

**the fire inside it was aflame
but never consumed or injured it.
The same with the *Theotokos*
Mary carried the fire of Divinity
nine months in her holy body
without blemishing her virginity.**

*Hymn of the Burning Bush,
Coptic Orthodox Church Kiahk Psalmody*

Is all this just playing with imagery? Something pretty like the baubles and bric-a-brac with which we brighten up our homes in the dark days of December? But there is a challenge in the imagery. A Christmas tree without lights is uninteresting. A thornbush in the desert seems hardly worth noticing. Jesus taught us,

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Mt 5:16

Talking about the Copts and the theme of fire, I was reminded of a saying of the Desert Fathers, the earliest monks, who set up camp in Egypt in the third century.

Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'

On this year's Christmas Tree in St Mary's, we have a splendid new set of 1,000 lights. I hope, when you see them, you see the Tree as the Burning Bush, aflame with God's glory, a symbol of the wonder of Christ's birth, and an invitation to us all to become on fire with the Light of Christ and give birth to his Love in our lives.

St Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

Saturday 26th December

Acts 6:8-10; 7:55-60

The Martyrdom of St Stephen

THE SEVEN deacons, appointed by the apostles to 'serve at tables', were, in fact prophets with whom the apostles were sharing the task of preaching and proclaiming. The 'serve at tables' notion is about authority to minister and we remember that the apostles themselves received their authority not least at the Last Supper with the Lord. Of these extra prophets we hear a great deal only about two: Philip and Stephen. Stephen, as today's first reading shows, came to a violent end before ever his ministry could extend beyond Israel. Though Stephen died by stoning, rather than by crucifixion, in many other ways his death mirrors that of his Lord. He has the face of an angel, is condemned by false witnesses for alleged blasphemy, prays for his persecutors, and commends his spirit to the Lord. Celebrating this feast so soon after the celebration of the birth of the Saviour reminds us of a couple of verses of the carol 'The Infant King' by Sabine Baring-Gould:

Sing lullaby

Lullaby baby, now a-sleeping

Sing lullaby

Hush, do not wake the Infant King

Soon will come sorrow with the morning

Soon will come bitter grief and weeping

Sing lullaby

Sing lullaby

Lullaby baby, now a-doing

Sing lullaby

Hush, do not wake the Infant King

Soon comes the cross, the nails, the piercing

Then in the grave at last reposing

Sing lullaby

During the joyful octave of Christ's Nativity we nonetheless turn our minds towards the martyrdom of St Stephen and, closer to home, that of St Thomas Becket (29th December), and, in the meantime, remember the Holy

Innocents (28th December). Our Faith comprehends Joy and Sorrow and indeed Light and Glory, as the Mysteries of the Holy Rosary remind us.

Holy Innocents

Monday 28th December

1 John 1:1-2:2

The Word of Life

THE FIRST Letter of John is recognisably from the same pen, or community, as the Gospel of John. The vocabulary – the Word, Light, Life, Love – is markedly similar and the opening chapter, from which the reading is taken, is a mini-version of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel. As in the Gospel there is something of a struggle going on. In the Gospel it was a struggle with the synagogue and those who are referred to as ‘the Jews’ – not the Jewish race but a particular group of religious leaders. That struggle might have reflected different views of Jesus, what he taught and how to interpret that teaching. The struggle in the First Letter of John is also over how to interpret what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. One group believed that all that matters is that one believes in Jesus as the Word of God. The other group believed that it was important to lead a moral life of integrity, love being the fundamental principle. As Christina Rossetti’s poem and carol says:

**Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
Star and angels gave the sign.**

**Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?**

**Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine;
Love to God and others,
Love for plea and gift and sign.**

St Thomas of Canterbury

Tuesday 29th December

1 John 2:3-11

Love one another

IN A WORLD divided into Light and Darkness, the world as seen by the First Letter of John, keeping the commandments and thus perfecting the love of God is the fundamental task of the Christian life. Later we shall see that the commandment to love is love for fellow Christians. This message, which we 'heard from the beginning' (v.11), is the message first learnt by the newly-converted. It is the grace of God that we are called – and learn to become – children of God. Sin, says the letter, is lawlessness, and those who commit sin are 'of the devil' (v.8). Though the message of Love is generous and warm, it is, in the end, uncompromising. The alternative to Light is not dimness or murkiness but utter darkness. Those who are 'born of God' do not commit sin' because they share God's nature. This is the struggle of the First Letter of John, between Love and Sin, Light and Darkness, Death and Life.

Wednesday 30th December

1 John 2:12-17

Anyone who does the will of God remains for ever

IN THE reading, we have three names for those addressed. 'Children', 'fathers', and 'young men' might be simple poetic repetition or may mean different groups. 'Children' might be general – all those who belong to the Johannine community, those in the sights of the Gospel of St John. 'Fathers' might be those who are most long-established in their faith. 'Children' might be the newly-converted. All are urged not to love the world, here a transitory place dominated by sin. Lust and the sins of the flesh, as is so often the case, are heavily implicated in love of the world.

New Year's Eve

Thursday 31st December

1 John 2:18-23

Warning against Antichrists

THE Evil One, the Anti-Christ looms large in the battle that faces those who follow Christ and practise the Law of Love. The struggle is already taking place. The strategy of the Devil is to persuade us that Jesus is not the Christ. We come across this quite often with people who think that Jesus might have been a good man, a good rabbi, a healer or worker of miracles, but certainly not the Son of God. But the writer of 1 John is uncompromising: to deny Christ is to deny the Father. We thus see that the battle is not an intellectual battle, a matter of argument, but a battle of Good versus Evil, a battle about what is really true. True believers have both eternal Life and the consolation of the Truth.

Reflection on the Readings of Christmastide

CHRISTMASTIDE stretches beyond the Octave Day, the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God (1st January), to the Epiphany (6th January), and beyond to a second manifestation of the Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ (this year on 10th January). During the weekdays of Christmastide we continue with the First Letter of John. This being a holiday season, you will permit an overview, rather than a reflection on each of the daily extracts. The passages themselves are given below. They are recognisably from the same pen, or community, as the Gospel of John. The vocabulary – the Word, Light, Life, Love – is clearly Johannine and, as we discovered, the struggle has moved on from the Jewish authorities in the Fourth Gospel, who opposed Jesus, to a struggle between different groups, with rival interpretations of what it might mean to be a disciple of Jesus. Is it sufficient to believe that Jesus is the Word of God or is it important to live a life of love, love for God and for one another.

Just as there is a distinction between Light and Darkness, there is a distinction between the law of Love and the life of Sin, between Death and Life. Those who are addressed as 'children' are 'children' of God because God has revealed himself as a loving father. We battle against the Evil One, the Anti-Christ, and the Devil's weapon is to persuade us that Jesus is not the Christ. The writer of 1 John is uncompromising: to deny Christ is to deny the Father. True believers have both eternal Life and the consolation of the Truth.

The anointing which has been received from the Holy One – here meaning either the Father or the Son, or indeed both - is itself a protection from lies and false teaching. By Baptism and Sealing – what we now call 'Confirmation' – we learn to discern not only what is true but also that we abide in God and God in us. This abiding is nothing less than Eternal Life and it is from this Life within us that we confess belief in the Son. Belief in the Son is also belief in the Father for 'he who confesses the Son has the Father also'.

A clear division appears between those who are born of God and commit no sin and those who are children of the devil, who are intrinsically sinful. The hope, for those who are born of God, is that they are the object of God's love, such that he is content for us to call him and know him as 'Father'. It is clear that what the writer here is calling 'sin' is a reference

to what, as Catholics, we know as 'mortal sin', the sin which separates us utterly from God. We remember a saying earlier in the letter:

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn 1:9)

What is explained in the first couple of chapters of 1 John in terms of light and darkness is subsequently explained in terms of love. The message of love is that the commandment of God is to believe in the name of the Lord Jesus and express that belief – prove its efficacy – in the love we have for one another. Loving one another is the message we have heard from the very beginning. It is always a surprise to discover fellow Christians – not least in social media - who do not seem to have read and internalised this, the heart of the Gospel!

Love is no sentimental matter. The template is the love that God has shown to us, expressed in chapter 4.

God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.

Fittingly, that is read on 8th January, a Friday, the day of the week when we are particularly mindful of the Sacrifice of Calvary. On Saturday 9th we hear a couple of useful summaries of the lesson of love:

¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

The second is an epigram, or perhaps a proverb:

¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.