

EPIPHANY TO CANDLEMAS 2021

Reflections

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Wednesday 6th January 2021



The Epiphany and the Incarnation Cycle

UNDERLYING the modern Church Calendar, which plunges us abruptly into 'Ordinary Time' on Monday, the day after the Baptism of the Lord, there is an 'Incarnation Cycle' which takes up most of the winter. It could be said to begin on Advent Sunday (the beginning of December) and extend to Candlemas (2nd February). During these three months we look forward to the various comings – the advents – of Christ as the new-born Messiah, as the One who on the Last Day will come again in glory as Saviour and Judge,

as the One who comes to us, day by day and week by week, not only in Holy Communion but in the needs of our neighbours, especially the disadvantaged.

As well as Christmastide itself, which lasts until the Baptism of the Lord, we have the Epiphany, which begins on 6th January, commemorating the visit of the Wise Men to Bethlehem, and extends beyond the Baptism of the Lord, in the sense that the plain old Green Second Sunday of the Year also has Epiphany themes. God is made manifest in Christ, which is what Epiphany means. And we are not finally at the cross-roads between the Incarnation Cycle and the Easter Cycle until Candlemas and Simeon's prophecy that the child presented in the Temple at Mary's Purification is the light that will lighten the nations and the glory of Israel.

The one most significant clue to the unity of the ancient Incarnation Cycle is the use, day by day, of *Alma Redemptoris Mater* as the Marian Antiphon, which we usually recite after Mass.

Thursday 7th – Saturday 9th January

The Weekdays 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, after Epiphany, we continue with the First Letter of John. This being a holiday season, we shall give an overview, rather than a reflection on each of the daily extracts. 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.

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD [B]

Sunday 10th January 2021



God is manifest at the Jordan as the Holy Trinity

THE ANCIENT season of Epiphany.... God showing himself to us, showing us his love, being right there in our midst. Light in our darkness. Light amidst the turmoil of our age. Light penetrating even the tragedies of plague and pestilence, and the terrible savagery of terrorism and war. When we look at God's self-disclosure in the Epiphany celebrations, we are looking at Light which cannot be overwhelmed by darkness, yet Light which is nonetheless shining within darkness. There was darkness then. There has been darkness since. There is darkness now. Eventually the Light will banish the darkness but not until the coming of the Kingdom.

In the Epiphany season, three particular events are singled out for our attention, three different manifestations of God's glory – three Theophanies, three Epiphanies. The first is the visit of the Magi to the Baby of Bethlehem (which is what has captured our imagination in the Christian West). The second is today's feast, the Baptism of the Lord in the River Jordan (which is the particular Epiphany emphasis of the Christian East). The third is the Wedding at Cana at Galilee, the Lord's first miracle, which, so important to the Fathers of the Ancient Church, nowadays tends to get squeezed out.

The Baptism of the Christ is rich in poetry. In the Office of Readings today, Saint Gregory Nazianzen, writing in the fourth century, draws these beautiful contrasts:

[John the Baptist] is the lamp in the presence of the sun, the voice in the presence of the Word, the friend in the presence of the Bridegroom, the greatest of all born of woman in the presence of the firstborn of all creation, the one who leapt in his mother's womb in the presence of him who was adored in the womb, the forerunner and future forerunner in the presence of him who has already come and is to come again.

The story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan is in all four gospels – or is it? To be absolutely precise, all four gospels tell us about Jesus and John the Baptist meeting at the River Jordan where John was baptising. Three of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke (today we heard Mark) – tell us that John the Baptist baptised Jesus. The fourth gospel – like the other three - tells us that the Holy Spirit, like a dove, came down on Jesus, but it doesn't actually say that Jesus was baptized.

In fact the Fourth Gospel highlights a problem for us. How can the one who never committed a sin – Jesus – be baptized for the forgiveness of sins? This problem – why did Jesus, who was sinless, agree to be baptised? If

baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, why was Jesus baptised? This problem was answered for us in the fifth century by St Maximus of Turin:

Christ is baptized, not that he may be sanctified in the waters, but that he himself may sanctify the waters.

So the baptism of Jesus is not so much something that happens to him as something that happens to us. He turns baptism into a way of sharing his life. If we're baptised, then we share his life.

All four gospels make it clear that at the River Jordan, as John the Baptist was baptizing, the Holy Spirit, like a dove, came down on Jesus. There's a voice from heaven: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on him'. The voice is the voice of God the Father. The one on whom the dove descends is God the Son. The dove is God the Holy Spirit. The Baptism of Jesus is not something that happens to him but an Epiphany – a manifestation, a revelation – by God to us. God reveals himself as the Father who speaks, as the Beloved Son, as the Holy Spirit who makes us, like Jesus, God's beloved sons.

And so the words of today's first reading become particularly appropriate.

**Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.**

That's us – each one of us, and all of us together – that the prophet Isaiah is speaking about. God's servant is an individual. God's servant is a nation, a people. God's servant is Jesus, baptised at the Jordan. God's servant is the one, whom by baptism and confirmation is his adopted son.

We – each one of us – are God's chosen one. God delights in us. He endows us and equips us with his Holy Spirit. And why? You are the way – I am the way – we are the way that God brings true justice to the world. Each one of us in our lives must work for God's kingdom. 'Thy kingdom come' we pray. And we pray it every day. When we have prayed and worked for 'true justice' in our homes, in our neighbourhood, in our school, where we work, that is when the Kingdom will come and Light will finally overwhelm the darkness. And so we need God's gifts to do his work. We ponder that scene at the River Jordan and think of these words as if they are spoken to each one of us:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

Week 1 (Year 1)

Monday 11th January

Hebrews 1:1-6

God has spoken to us through his Son

THE LETTER to the Hebrews was widely thought to be by St Paul, though no longer, and its destination Rome, though nowadays other places have been suggested. The audience seems to be second generation Christians undergoing hardship and persecution. It may have begun life as a letter – perhaps with the opening paragraph of address lost – but, equally, in type though not in content, it is perhaps typical of the kind of homily one might hear in a synagogue. It certainly has midrash-like characteristics, a midrash being the rabbis’ approach to interpreting Scripture.

Hebrews may have been written by Paul but Apollos is a possibility too. As for when, the letter is quoted in AD96 by Clement of Rome and some have argued that it must have been written before AD70 when the temple was destroyed, since so much of the discussion is round themes of temple, priesthood, and sacrifice. Others have taken the opposite view and said that its preoccupation with these themes indicates a date after the destruction of the temple.

The Exordium (the beginning of the book) is highly-polished and presents the Son as one who ‘reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of

his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power'. This Son is higher than the angels and, before taking his place 'at the right hand of the Majesty on high', 'made purification for sins', which is a priestly – indeed high priestly – task as we shall see. Meanwhile we should note – rather than take for granted – that we encounter and are encountered by a God who spoke, and speaks, to the human race, through prophets and eventually through his Son. This is far from the only – or even the most obvious – conclusion which, left to ourselves, we would draw from reflecting on the world and our own existence, but it is the conclusion which we draw from God's self-disclosure. It is not that reason contradicts revelation, still less that revelation contradicts reason. Hebrews not only tells us what God has done and is doing – revelation – but also gives us arguments to organise our thoughts – reason.

Tuesday 12th January

St Ælred of Rievaulx, Abbot

Hebrews 2:5-12

It was appropriate that God should make perfect through suffering

I THINK we can be confident that, when the author says 'testified somewhere', he is employing a literary device rather than confessing that he does not know that these are verses from Psalm 8. At the end of today's passage, he similarly quotes from Psalm 22, without mentioning the source.

We are wrestling with the paradox that man is 'lower than the angels' but that the Son, who became man, is higher than any angel. It is the mystery of condescension: God stooping to share our humanity, and thus ducking below the angelic orders. The reason for this condescension is so that the Son experiences 'the suffering of death', whereby he tastes 'death for every one' and, as the 'pioneer of [our] salvation is made perfect in suffering'. 'He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin', the Saviour and the saved are 'brethren'. Perfection is a key idea in Hebrews. It is what Jesus does – by offering himself as an atoning sacrifice – and what this self-offering does for those who believe in him.

We are dealing with several puzzling ideas here. As well as the idea of God becoming lower in rank than the angels – think, perhaps, of a Field Marshall

becoming a Private Soldier, or a Brain Surgeon a Hospital Cleaner – we are faced with suffering and death as inevitable. Why is this so? We are also faced with suffering as a way of becoming perfect and as a way of making things holy and putting things right. All of these ideas are part of our experience. None of them is new to us. But it isn't immediately obvious why any of them should be the case.

Wednesday 13th January

St Hilary, Bishop and Doctor of the Church

Hebrews 2:14-18

It was essential that Jesus should share the same flesh and blood

FOLLOWING on from yesterday, we continue to ponder the mystery that God chose to share our human nature and thus wage war on sin and death. He is not concerned with angels, we are told, but with 'the descendants of Abraham'. Narrowly speaking, these descendants are 'the Hebrews', those to whom the book is apparently addressed. More widely, we see ourselves among those who look back to Abraham and therefore, since Christ died for everyone, the whole human race. The revolutionary message of the Gospel – very different from what other religions teach – is that human beings become 'brethren' of God, brothers and sisters. God comes to our rescue because he shares our flesh and blood, has himself suffered and been tempted. We now begin to explore the idea of the 'merciful and faithful high priest', a major theme of Hebrews. Priests in Israel spoke prophetically through casting lots (Lev 16:8; Deut 33:8). They were in charge of the sanctuary (Num 3:38) and of ritual purity (Lev 13 – 15). They offered sacrifices (Lev 16:6, 15; Deut 33:10) and were usually based in the sanctuary. So, as well as seeing Jesus as God incarnate, taking our human nature, we see him as expressing and fulfilling the role of priest. More than that: 'of high priest'. More than that: 'a merciful and faithful high priest'. The other high priest – the chief functionary of the Jewish temple – falls short of what is offered to us in Christ.

Thursday 14th January

Hebrews 3:7-14

As long as this 'today' lasts, keep encouraging one another

JUST before this morning's reading, there was a comparison drawn between Jesus and Moses. Moses was faithful but a servant of God. Jesus, by contrast, is God's Son. It is as different as the difference between the house builder and a house. We continue with a comparison between the time of Moses and the time of Jesus. In the earlier time, the people of Israel were disobedient, with hearts hardened, and the warning now is not to follow that example. Those who turn against God do not enter his rest – the Promised Land – and that gives us every incentive to stay on the strait and narrow and to support one another in the journey of discipleship.

Friday 15th January

Hebrews 4:1-5, 11

We must do all that we can to reach this place of rest.

HEBREWS is severe in tone. Today's passage gives us dire warnings about not responding to the Good News as preached. The response required is the response of faith, putting one's trust in God. Those who believe will enter God's rest, the Promised Land. 'God's rest' is the Sabbath, the seventh day in the Creation story, by which time God's work is complete. Although the response required is 'faith', failure to respond is 'disobedience'. We therefore conclude that the act of faith – belief and trust in God – is basically an act of obedience. This is a very Hebrew perspective. The Old Testament story is told very much in terms of obedience to the Covenant and the consequence of disobedience.

Saturday 16th January

Hebrews 4:12-16

Let us be confident in approaching the throne of Grace

WE HAVEN'T always looked, week by week, at the Saturday reading but it would be a shame not to notice the reading set for today. It includes not one but two 'purple passages'. The first is a glorious reflection on the Word of God, something vital and penetrating, able to open up and disclose the depths of our being. 'Living' in Hebrews is a participle describing God himself: hence, the Word of God here means the Word spoken by God, the Word which brought about Creation. It also refers to Holy Scripture which itself is inspired by God and, in that sense, uttered by God. The second 'purple passage' is the 'great high priest' passage, inviting us to put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as one who is able to sympathize fully with us, having shared our human existence and been tempted, as we are, yet without sinning. We have confidence then in drawing near to the throne of grace, trusting in his mercy and help.

SECOND SUNDAY *Per Annum* [B]

Sunday 17th January



The Marriage at Cana

THE PROBLEM that always presents itself with this 'first sign' in Jesus' ministry, as told to us in the Fourth Gospel, is the extraordinary quantity of wine. A wedding feast with 180 gallons of the finest wine – 50 cases of 12 bottles as we should say today – is what we have here when the wine provided by the host has run out! Why, asks the head waiter, has this very best wine been kept till last? The feast is seen by the Church as the third of the three manifestations – epiphanies – in which God makes known his love and his glory. It happened with the Wise Men in Bethlehem. It happened with St John the Baptist at the Jordan. It happens now in the Wedding Feast at Cana. As always with St John, we see behind the storytelling (and there is no good reason to regard his account of things as not being accurate) and consider the symbols. So this 'wedding feast' is both the feast promised in the Old Testament (Isaiah 25:6) and the Marriage Feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9) which is the culmination of our earthly pilgrimage. It also links in with the wedding feast in the parable (e.g. Mt 22:1-14), the Feeding of the Multitudes (e.g. Mk 6:30-44), and the Eucharist, whether linked to the Feeding of the Multitudes (John 6) or associated with the Last Supper (Mt 26:17-30, Mk 14:12-26, Lk. 22:7-39). The finest wine is also associated with the revelation and wisdom that

come from God (Prov 9:4-5, Sirach 24:20-21) and the promise of abundant wine associated with the Messiah (Amos 9:13-14). This is foretold mysteriously in the Book of Genesis (Gen 49:10-11), worth here quoting in full.

**The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
¹¹ Binding his foal to the vine
and his ass's colt to the choice vine,
he washes his garments in wine
and his vesture in the blood of grapes;**

No less intriguing is the interplay in the story of the Wedding Feast of Our Lady and her Son. She intercedes on behalf of the wedding family, is at first rebuffed because her Son's hour has not yet come, but this leads to a profound statement of discipleship ('Do whatever he tells you.') as in the Annunciation at Nazareth: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' (Lk 1:38). Mother and Son certainly but, in the context of the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, the Bride - the Mystical Body of the Church - and the Bridegroom.

Christian Unity Octave

18th – 25th January

Each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided?

1 Corinthians 1:12-13a

ST PAUL is addressing **the church of God in Corinth**. But what is the church of God in Corinth? Paul answers the question for us. It is a local church. It is, to quote St Paul, earlier in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, **the holy people of Jesus Christ, who are called to take their place among the saints everywhere**. And how do we know who are 'the saints everywhere'? They are, says St Paul, those **who pray to our Lord Jesus Christ**. And why must

we be concerned with all these other people, throughout the world, 'who pray to our Lord Jesus Christ'? Because, says St Paul, **he is their Lord no less than ours.** We reflect that it is this letter, the first letter to the Church in Corinth, in which St Paul gives us his teaching about the Body of Christ, the Church. I still have on my bookshelves John Robinson's monograph *The Body*. SCM published it in 1952 and I read it as a student in 1970.

Here is a bit of what Robinson has to say:

One could say without exaggeration that the concept of the body forms the keystone of Paul's theology. In its closely interconnected meanings, the word soma knits together all his great themes. It is from the body of sin and death that we are delivered; it is through the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into his body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by his body in the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is in our body that its new life has to be manifested; it is to a resurrection of this body to the likeness of his glorious body that we are destined.

The Body, SCM 1952 p9

The work of Christian unity is fellowship and co-operation with all the baptised. But, for us, there is the additional ecumenical task of making it possible for our separated brothers and sisters to find unity with the rock from which we are hewn, the Church Catholic. How else than through the united witness of the universal Church can we obey the call to be **the light of the nations?** How else can we work and pray for the coming of God's kingdom so that his **salvation may reach to the end of the earth?**

Week 2 (Year 1)

Monday 18th January

Hebrews 5:1-10

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered

THE CONTRAST between the Jewish High Priest - 'chosen from among men' and 'appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins' – and Jesus, the Son of God, appointed by God himself is sharply drawn. The High Priest, chosen by his peers for the task, is temporary, beset by his own weakness, and therefore having to offer sin-offerings on his own behalf as well as on behalf of others. Like Aaron, the earthly high priest is chosen from among the living (Sirach 45:16). We see this process of selection in Lev 8:2 with reference to Aaron and his sons and similarly in Num 8:6 with reference to the Levites. By contrast, quoting Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4, the writer speaks of Jesus the High Priest as God's Son, appointed by him, and as a priest after the order of Melchiz'edek. We shall hear more about Melchiz'edek later on, but for now we note that whereas there are generations of priests after Aaron's line, Melchiz'edek was a one-off. The order of Melchiz'edek, because it is unique, is therefore an eternal model. From this follows, the High Priesthood of Christ is unique and eternal. He is not chosen from among mortals, his offering is once and for all, and his offering for sin is not on his own behalf, because, of course, he is without sin.

Tuesday 19th January

St Wulstan, Religious, Bishop

Hebrews 6:10-20

The Certainty of God's Promise

THE EPISTLE to the Hebrews holds before us the holiness of God, 'the unchangeable character of his purpose'. It encourages us not to be sluggish but to be 'imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises'. There is no going back to how things were – no second repentance is possible. Instead, we need to keep moving on 'to seize the hope set before us'. The writer identifies two unchangeable things. The first is God's word and the second is God's oath. In fact these two things really amount to the same: God's word is so trustworthy that it has the status of an oath. God's oath is trustworthy because he can swear by nothing greater than himself because he is supreme. God's faithfulness can be tracked back to the promise he made to Abraham, a promise reinforced by his word and his oath. Our hope in God has this as its context but is now focused on Jesus who goes beyond the curtain to act as the High Priest. The curtain is what conceals the Holy of Holies from our view – as with the Jewish Temple – and, for our purposes, it is the boundary between death and life which Jesus has crossed through his death and resurrection. As for Melchiz'edek, we heard a bit about him yesterday and we shall be hearing more about him tomorrow.

Wednesday 20th January

Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17

The Priestly Order of Melchizedek

WE HEAR about Melchiz'edek not only in the Letter to the Hebrews but also during the Mass in the Roman Canon. The story which begins this passage comes from Genesis 14, here as found in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. At this point in the Genesis story Abraham is still called 'Abram' and he acknowledges the priestly blessing from the Melchiz'edek by paying tithes to him. As we discover with the Old Testament priesthood as it emerges after Moses' meetings with God on Mount Sinai, the priesthood is sustained by a tithing population. At the end of the reading we have another mention of Melchiz'edek, the quotation from

Ps 110:4 where he is cast as a Messianic figure. The Church, following Hebrews, sees the priesthood of Melchiz'edek as foreshadowing that of Christ, not only because of the Messiah imagery, but because in both cases priesthood involves the offering of bread and wine. This takes us beyond the animal sacrifices and sin-offerings of the Temple. There are extra layers of symbolism in that Melchiz'edek is given various titles: 'King of righteousness', 'King of Salem', and 'King of Peace', all of which are appropriate titles for Christ. Furthermore the mysterious figure from pre-history is said to be without father or mother or genealogy. Like Christ he has no beginning and no end.

Thursday 21st January

St Agnes, Virgin, Martyr

Hebrews 7:25 - 8:6

Mediator of a Better Covenant

WE HEARD earlier in the argument (Heb 2:10) that it was 'fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering'. We now hear that it is 'fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens' (Heb 7:26). In other words, it was fitting for God that Jesus should be made perfect through suffering and fitting for us that Jesus be a sinless High Priest. We discover through this something of the mystery of suffering. Suffering is not just what happens to us: there is suffering in the heart of God. God was and is never imperfect but his perfection is partly explained by the suffering which in Christ he freely chose to undergo. As for the role of High Priest, we learn from the Torah, the Jewish Law, what the task of the High Priest is. He is a mediator, one who makes sin offerings on behalf of the people and on his own behalf. The High Priest, thus understood, was temporary: there was a succession of them. He is also a flawed human being: his sin offerings are partly on his own behalf and not a perfect offering for the people. So not only are there, over the course of time, many high priests, but there are whole cycles of sacrifice, involving less than perfect means – the blood of bulls and goats – to achieve at best temporary ends. Nonetheless, this system of sacrificial worship was a copy – an imitation, a type, a shadow – of the heavenly worship. What the system needed, and what it found in Jesus, was a perfect High Priest who could make the offering just the once. Furthermore it becomes a perfect

offering, using the perfect means. The perfect sin-offering, the perfect atonement – at-one-ment – is the God-Man Jesus offering his own life, made perfect – that is, complete – through suffering. We edge towards an understanding of this awesome mystery but, as is the case with mysteries, we cannot finally grasp it. It is truly awesome because we cannot grasp it.

Friday 22nd January

St Vincent, Deacon, Martyr

Hebrews 8:6-13

A New Covenant with the House of Israel

WE REFER to the Old Testament and the New Testament, the two parts of the Bible. At Mass we read more of the New than of the Old, despite the fact that the Old is about three-quarters of the Bible and the New only about a quarter. ‘Testament’ is simply an old word for ‘covenant’ and a ‘covenant’ is a solemn and binding agreement. When we look through the ‘Old Testament’, the Hebrew Scriptures, we discover that there is more than one ‘covenant’ within it. There was a covenant with Noah, a covenant with Abraham, a covenant with Moses, a covenant with David. And more besides. Nonetheless, it is the covenant with Moses which most concerns us, and this is what the Letter to the Hebrews calls ‘the first covenant’. God leads his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land – from death to life. The covenant is negotiated primarily on Mount Sinai – the Ten Commandments and the whole system of priesthood and sacrifice are given to Moses there – and much of the Hebrew Scriptures is viewed through the prism of obedience and disobedience. Disobedience – the failure of the people to be able to keep their side of the bargain – is the rationale given for the collapse of kings, for exile, subjugation by foreign empires, and tragic outcomes of one kind or another, especially with regard to Jerusalem, the Temple and capital. Contained within the Old Testament are promises of renewal and redemption, new outcomes. What Hebrews quotes here is from the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34), as given in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. It is a very clear statement of the hope of salvation – a glorious future for God’s people after the calamity of the Jewish Exile in Babylon. Christians interpret that glorious future not in terms of the rather chequered history of Judaism after the Return from Exile, a history of subjugation by one empire after another,

but in the coming of Christ, not as a conquering warrior-king but as one who establishes a new covenant, a new agreement.

Saturday 23rd January

Hebrews 9:2-3, 11-14

Let us be confident in approaching the Throne of Grace

WE HAVEN'T finished yet with Hebrews: there are another couple of weeks of readings at weekday Mass from that dense theological treatise, more a sermon than a letter. Nevertheless today's reading is a suitable place to take stock. We are comparing the apparatus of the Holy Place and its ceremonies and customs with what is achieved by the Priesthood of Christ. The Jewish Temple had a series of courts, each leading to a more exclusive enclosure – rather like, if you go to the Buckingham Palace Garden Party, you find that within the hallowed precincts there are further enclosures into which only certain people are admitted. The most exclusive enclosures in the Jerusalem Temple were the Holy Place and, beyond that, the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could go, and then only once in the year, on the Day of Atonement. Christ the High Priest enters the Holy Place just once – once and for all – and the redemption he achieves is not through animal sacrifice but through the shedding of his own blood. The further contrast is that the annual Atonement sacrifice serves for the purification of the flesh, whereas the sacrifice of Christ purifies our consciences, and re-vivifies us in God's service. The annual sacrifice was flawed. The eternal sacrifice of Christ is without blemish. Some of this symbolism helps us to understand our own Church architecture, or better still, the architecture serves to remind us of the theology. Our altars, at St Mary's and St Patrick's, are set within a sanctuary, the 'Holy Place'. That is where the sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated – about which there will be more to say. Beyond and behind the altar, in both churches, is the Tabernacle – the word is the same as 'tent' – the Holy of Holies, where Christ is eternally present to his people. His presence is marked for us by a light which is kept burning, a light shining in the darkness and not overwhelmed by it.

THIRD SUNDAY *Per Annum* [B]

Sunday 24th January

Sunday of the Word of God

As the Second Vatican Council teaches, 'the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she has venerated the Lord's body, in that she never ceases, above all in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the body of Christ' (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

The Word of God is in no way less than the Body of Christ; nor should it be received less worthily.

I ask you, brothers or sisters, tell me: which to you seems the greater, the word of God, or the Body of Christ? If you wish to say what is true you will have to answer that the word of God is not less than the Body of Christ.

Therefore just as when the Body of Christ is administered to us, what care do we not use so that nothing of it falls from our hands to the ground, so should we with equal care see that the word of God which is being imparted to us shall not be lost to our soul, while we speak or think of something else.

For he who listens carelessly to the word of God is not less guilty than he who through his own inattention suffers the Body of Christ to fall to the ground.

St Caesarius of Arles (469-541) *Sermo 300*

Week 3 (Year 1)

Conversion of St Paul

Monday 25th January



Acts 22:3-16

St Paul tells of his conversion

MOST Saints' Days mark the death of saints and their passing into glory. The notable exceptions are St John the Baptist and Our Lady, the beginning of whose lives are also celebrated. Two of the apostles – Peter and Paul – have not only their day of death commemorated but also a notable stage in their life. In the case of St Peter, it is the Chair of St Peter (22nd February) and in the case of St Paul, it is the feast of his conversion, celebrated today. In an older version of the Roman Calendar, the feast of

the Chair of St Peter was celebrated on 18th January, kept by some non-Catholics as 'the Confession of St Peter', celebrating the famous incident at Caesarea Philippi where Simon Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. The two feasts, 18th January and 25th January, inspired the Episcopalian friar, Fr Paul Watson, to invent the Octave (later 'Week') of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1908. The point was that the St Peter event is of particular significance for Catholics whilst the preaching of St Paul and the phenomenon of adult conversion to Christ is of particular significance for Protestants. Both emphases are important. For Catholics, what is crucial is belonging to the Household of Faith, the Ark of Salvation, a membership which begins at Baptism, often at a very early age. For Protestants, what is crucial is coming to a living Faith in Christ, something which often happens in adulthood. So, where Catholics emphasise the founding of the Church at Caesarea Philippi, the role of St Peter, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Protestants emphasise the turning point in life where, just as Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Apostle, so someone lacking a living Faith has a life-changing encounter with Christ.

Tuesday 26th January

SS Timothy & Titus, Bishops

Hebrews 10:1-10

Christ's Sacrifice once for all

TODAY'S reading from Hebrews (10:1-10) is the first part of a summary of the argument so far. The second and concluding part of the summary will come in tomorrow's reading (Hebrews 10:11-18). Today we are looking again at the ineffectiveness of the sacrificial system. It involves endless repetition – year on year – of the sacrifice of the blood of bulls and goats, which patently does not work as a sin offering. If it did, the worshippers would no longer be aware of sin and would not need to return to the place of sacrifice year after year. And so we learn that the coming of Christ into the world puts an end to all that, precisely in a way which is foretold in Scripture. Well, not quite precisely as we find it: the quotation from Ps 40, like similar quotations, is from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. It is not that the earlier system was wrong. It was honoured by God but then abolished by the later system. We are familiar with this notion of earlier and later versions: St Thomas Aquinas, in the hymn

Tantum ergo, sung at Benediction, at the Transfer of the Holy Eucharist on Maundy Thursday, and at Corpus Christi, reminds us that 'Types and shadows have their ending, for the newer rite is here'. There is the old and there is the new. An Old Covenant and a New Covenant, each undergirded by sacrifice.

Wednesday 27th January

Hebrews 10:11-18

The Priestly Order of Melchizedek

YESTERDAY'S passage, Hebrews 10:1-10, is the first half of a longer section, of which today's passage, Hebrews 10:11-18, is the second half. Having contrasted the ineffectiveness of the sacrifices of the Temple with the effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice, and contrasting the many priests of the Old Covenant with the One High Priest of the New Covenant, we conclude that Christ's sacrifice is once and for all, and brings about an entirely new situation. For now God remembers our sins no more: the forgiveness brought about by Christ means that there is no longer any offering for sin. We notice that this High Priest sits at the right hand of God, itself a single event, which contrasts with the priests of the temple, who, over and over again, have to stand to make the offerings for sin. The sacrifice of Christ perfects 'for all time those who are sanctified' and to this new state of affairs, this New Covenant, the Holy Spirit is the witness. The words here, slightly altered to make the writer's point, are from Jeremiah 31:33-34. We get 'hearts and minds' rather than 'minds and hearts' because it is with the whole heart that we are invited in the Book of Deuteronomy to serve the Lord.

Thursday 28th January

St Agnes, Virgin, Martyr

Hebrews 10:19-25

A Call to Persevere

BY NOW we have studied the main thrust of the Epistle to the Hebrews: the sacrifice of Christ the eternal High Priest, once offered, has replaced the annual sin-offerings, the blood of bulls and goats, offered by the Temple priesthood. The priesthood of Christ is without beginning and end, not in

the lineage of Aaron but after the timeless example of Melchizedek, a one-off, mythical figure. It is time now for us to look at embracing the truth and draw near to the sanctuary, to which we have privileged access through the Blood of Christ. We are not only concerned with entering the sanctuary (vv. 24-25) but finding fellowship one with another within the earthly sanctuary. Entering the sanctuary is something we can do with confidence, since we approach with 'a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water' (v.22). So: faith, forgiveness, baptism. But, as an answer to the often-expressed belief that 'you don't have to go to Church to be a Christian', we notice the constant use of 'we' and 'us', rather than the singular forms, the admonition 'to stir up one another to love and good works' and the specific instruction 'not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some'. Christian believers meet together for 'encouraging one another...all the more as [we] see the Day drawing near.' As we look for the coming of the Kingdom, we support one another in work and prayer.

Friday 29th January

St Vincent, Deacon, Martyr

Hebrews 10:32-39

Remember the hard struggle with sufferings

HAD WE carried on where we left off yesterday – instead of missing out verses 26-31 – we should have encountered a warning of judgment, aimed specifically at those who intentionally sin. We are talking here about evil acts, not peccadilloes. Sinning 'unintentionally' or 'unwittingly' seems to be covered by various texts from the Jewish Law (Lev 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15; Num 15:27-29; 35:11; Deut 19:4; Josh 20:3, 9). The matter in these cases is serious and when the sin is committed deliberately there is, says the Letter to the Hebrews, no further forgiveness available for those who have already received the forgiveness of baptism. It is in the light of this stern warning that today's extract offers us encouragement. It could be summed up as: you have come so far along the road, don't throw it all away now!

Saturday 30th January

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

Abraham looked forward to the city whose builder and maker is God

CHAPTER 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews gives us a great list of heroes of the Faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Today's extract from the chapter deals principally with Abraham and Sarah. The burden of the message is that 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. We are not reflecting on the good deeds that these leading figures managed to perform but on the tenacity of their faith. Faith, as we learn from Abraham's preparedness to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice – a sacrifice which was not required of him – is belief and trust in the promises of God, promises of which these figures could catch a glimpse but promises which would not be realised within their own lifetimes.

FOURTH SUNDAY *Per Annum* [B]

Sunday 31st January

Septuagesima and Candlemas

AT THIS time of year the Church Calendar is a little untidy. Between Advent and Candlemas – the Winter months – we think of the coming of Christ, his birth, and his presentation as a young child in the temple. When Spring comes – think Candlemas and snowdrops – we have already encountered the adult Jesus, preaching and healing, confronting the authorities, and we see him making his way to Jerusalem, there to suffer and to die. In a short space we seem to have progressed from Christmas to Easter, from Birth to Resurrection. There are inevitable difficulties, exploring thirty-three years in little over three months. So we have duplications and things out of chronological sequence.

An earlier version of our Calendar marked out the three Sundays before Lent as the '*gesima*' Sundays. The first of these – *Septuagesima* – occurs this year on 31st January. Had we been observing that, we should be discontinuing the *Gloria* at Mass, burying the *Alleluia* until Easter, and putting on purple vestments already. This 'Greater Lent' is untidy in its

own way: if *Septua-* means 'seventy', *Sexa-* means 'sixty', and *Quinqua-* 'fifty', you could be forgiven for taking terms literally and thinking that weeks last ten days. Nonetheless, it is not a bad idea to have a short season preparing for the onset of a thoughtful and considered Lent.

It is usual to see Candlemas as an old-fashioned signpost, one arm pointing back to Christmas, the other pointing forward to Easter. The Incarnation Cycle is followed by the Easter Cycle. Sometimes, because Easter is moveable, there is a gap between the end of one and the beginning of the other – an inconvenient week or two. That is one kind of untidiness. Another is what we have this year – the one ending two days after the other has started. These untidy details superficially remind us that the liturgical Calendar is organic – it has grown through the ages, and sometimes has needed to be pruned. But more profoundly we are aware that all these mysteries which we celebrate are with us always. They are timeless. So the Christ who comes at Christmas comes to us in the Holy Eucharist and will come at the end of time. The Risen Lord who will greet us on Easter Morning is the underlying reality on whom our faith has been based since our own baptism and the baptisms of those who have gone before us. As we have sought to experience the Word made Flesh in the Incarnation, let us now look forward to walking the Way of the Cross and so sharing in the glory of the Resurrection.

Week 4 (Year 1)

Monday 1st February

Hebrews 11:32-40

God had foreseen something better for us

AFTER paying tribute to the faith of Moses and of those who entered the Promised Land, the Letter to the Hebrews moves on to consider a list of subsequent figures. Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel are mentioned by name, and the prophets are mentioned as a group, but there is reference then to the unnamed heroes – male and female – whose faith was marked by courage, endurance, and hardship.

What links all these people is that none fully received what was promised since God had in store something more for those who come after. They form a cloud of witnesses for those who put their faith and trust in Christ and they – with us – will find fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem, of which the Promised Land, towards which Moses travelled with the children of Israel, was a foretaste.

The Presentation of the Lord (CANDLEMAS)

Tuesday 2nd February



Luke 2:22-40

Jesus is presented in the Temple

TODAY'S celebration marks the end of the Incarnation Cycle in the Calendar. It commemorates the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple by his parents, forty days after his birth. Formerly known as 'the Purification',

a feast of our Lady, marking her ritual purification after childbirth, this celebration is now observed as a feast of the Lord. Mary and Joseph were obedient to the Law and brought offerings. Lev 12:6 tells us what is expected: a year-old lamb and either a turtle dove or a young pigeon. For those who are poor, as Joseph and Mary clearly were, a couple of turtle doves or two young pigeons suffice. St Luke often pairs a male and a female character in the story, so we have Simeon and Anna, both living in expectation of salvation from the Lord. Also typical of St Luke is the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has revealed to Simeon that, though he is old, he will not die before he sees the Messiah and, accordingly, he is 'inspired by the Spirit' to come to the Temple. Meanwhile, though 'night and day' is probably an exaggeration, the prophetess Anna spends a great deal of time in the temple precincts, and, seeing the Holy Family, prophesies the redemption of Israel. Simeon's song – *Nunc Dimittis* used daily at Night Prayer in the Church – recalls the theme of Isaiah's Servant Songs (see Is 42:6; 49:6), that the Lord's Anointed will be a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel. Forty days after Christmas, the days are still short and the nights long, so it is no surprise that the Church seizes on the theme of Light of Christ in a dark world and celebrates with candles. It is also traditionally the occasion on which the candles for the year – at church and at home – are blessed.

Wednesday 3rd February

St Blaise, Bishop & Martyr

Hebrews 12:1-7, 11-15

The Example of Jesus

YESTERDAY'S passage from the Letter to the Hebrews was pushed aside by the celebration of Candlemas. So we have strung together yesterday's and today's reading, to make a longer reading and to ensure that we can continue to follow the argument. What we have today is, first, the metaphor of a race (vv.1-4), with the risen, ascended, and glorified Lord cheering us on. Not only that but we are encouraged by the example he has set by enduring everything for the joy that lay ahead. We are encouraged too by the 'great cloud of witnesses', the heroes about whom we were speaking earlier this week. The next section of the chapter (vv.4-13) is about the part discipline plays in the development of endurance – in the athletic training, if you will – and we read the beginning and end of that

section (vv.4-7, 11-13). The last couple of verses of today's reading (vv.14-17) set in a community context what might be seen as an individual effort. After all, runners each run in search of an individual victory, and individual prize. The community is rather like a team: a team depends on peace and lack of rancour. We need not only individual holiness and virtue but communal holiness and virtue.

Thursday 4th February

Hebrews 12:18-19, 21-24

You have come to Mount Zion, to the City of the Living God

THE HOMILY – if the Epistle to the Hebrews is a homily – is coming to a climax. We contrast the earthly Mount Sinai with its daunting restrictions with the heavenly Mount

Zion. The one is the inauguration of the Old Covenant, when God spoke to Moses and gave him the Law (both the Ten Commandments and the complex ceremonial of priesthood, sacrifice, and sanctuary). The mountain was not to be touched, there is darkness and gloom, thunder and the fearsome phenomenon of the *phonos*, the voice of God. All of this makes Moses tremble with fear. The other, Mount Zion, is the encounter with Jesus, mediator of the New Covenant. Here we encounter vibrant angelic life, the congregation of the just – that is, those enrolled in heaven - and the satisfaction of the perfect sin offering, which the writer contrasts with the blood shed by Abel, the blood of an innocent man which, until the sacrifice of Christ, cried out for vengeance.

Friday 5th February

St Agatha, Virgin & Martyr

Hebrews 13:1-8

Service well-pleasing to God

WE HAVE reached the final chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. As we saw at the outset, it may have been a sermon, originally, rather than a letter. Some have suggested that the abrupt change of gear from chapter 12 to chapter 13 might indicate that chapter 13 is an addition, perhaps

from another source. Others see chapter 13 as drawing out and emphasising themes found earlier in the book. By this stage we have covered some complex theological argument and unscrambled some very dense imagery and, whatever the literary origins, it is something of a relief to find ourselves now looking at some very straightforward moral exhortation, such as one might find either in a letter or a sermon. We begin with *philadelphia*, the love felt between blood relatives and this is extended to caring for others. By doing this 'some have entertained angels unawares', a deservedly famous phrase, summing up the heart of Jesus' teaching in the parable of 'The Great Assize':

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. (Mt 25:40)

There are warnings about sexual morality, the love of money, and covetousness. These warnings are to be expected in the context of a sermon or letter which has sternly taught that there is no second repentance.

Saturday 6th February

SS Paul Miki & Companions, Martyrs

Hebrews 13:15-17, 20-21

Sacrifices well-pleasing to God

THE LEADERS, whom the Letter mentioned yesterday (v.7) were those 'who spoke ... the word of God'. We were to 'consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith'. What was true remains true because 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (v.8). The final exhortation tells us to have respect for the leaders of today, whilst we offer a sacrifice of praise to God and practise good works (vv.15-16). Then, following a blessing, the Epistle to the Hebrews finishes with greetings, much as do the letters of St Paul, of which this book – letter or homily – was once thought to belong.