

Advent 1 2016, 'The Advent of Christ'  
Pusey House, GDW  
Micah 4.1-4, 6-7, Psalm 25.1-9, Romans 13.8-14, Matthew 21.1-13

***And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.***

The Gospel we have heard today, the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, is surely what we expect to hear on Palm Sunday, so why do we hear it today? There is a signal in this surprising placement, a kind of indication that we are not simply beginning a new Church year, but that something much greater is happening. In any celebration of the coming of Christ, time is being bent, broken open, re-ordered. Or maybe it is we who are being broken upon, re-ordered, made new.

On one level, we may consider the Gospel account as an event in history. But this is a strange kind of history – the cryptic instructions about how to find the ass and the colt alert us that these actions are also signs and symbols, It is a history which looks both backward and forward, with vertical as well as horizontal dimensions. On the one hand the Gospel history is a fulfilment of what was spoken by the prophets: Tell ye the daughter of Sion, ***Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.***

On the other hand it looks forward: the words from Psalm 118, ***Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord*** -- it celebrates a fulfilment and looks forward to what is yet to be accomplished. They announce the coming of a King who will save and restore, but in so doing, they point to a messianic future for which they are still waiting:

***And he shall judge among many people, ... and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares.*** (from Micah 4)

It is a future which we still await.

The Gospel is a kind of history, but a strange kind of history where the past, present and future mingle, the horizontal and vertical interpenetrate – but then, maybe all our histories are like this?

Every time we gather to worship, to celebrate these holy mysteries, we are invited to enter a space where the past, the present, and the future or the eternal interact. This is not simply a kind of game, a curiosity, but it is in this capacity to make the past present and to draw the eternal into time that the liturgy takes on a therapeutic character, with a power to heal our wounded freedom, to deliver us to the Shepherd who rescues us and take us home.

Let's begin with the problem which the Gospel and the Epistle put before us. On the one hand, there is the problem of expectation, the people seem to expect Jesus to exercise the kind of kingship which would throw the Roman army out of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. This hope mixed with power politics seems connected with the more immediate crisis, the problem of corruption in the Temple. He ***went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple; and overthrew the tables of the money-changers.*** This judgement may reflect the corruption which seems to have been part of the process by which worshippers exchanged their Roman money for special temple mone which was the only currency allowed in the temple. The surprising roughness suggests a more serious corruption, perhaps the intrusion of the

idea that the worshippers could purchase divine blessing while just getting on as normal. This corruption of the divine economy of grace is an example of what St Paul calls ‘the works of darkness’ in the Epistle, of the dishonesty, envy, the violence which corrupt the economy of divine love and justice.

***It is written, my House shall be called a house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves.*** The corruption of exchange does not appear to be a problem isolated to the four walls of the Temple, but rather a problem which displays the disorder of the holy city and the called-to-be-holy people. Jerusalem is never just a city in the Bible. It is a home, an ideal, and a promise for the future. The temple in Jerusalem becomes in the NT a prophetic image of the Church, the assembly of all God’s people. The Temple made with stones is replaced by the temple of Christ’s body, and the Temple where he dwells in His body: ***know ye not***, says St Paul, ***that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you.***<sup>1</sup> The work of the temple of God, the work of the soul, is prayer. This passage does not teach us the importance of having some little part of our life dedicated to God, or keeping some room in our souls as a sort of prayer room. “In its most fundamental sense, praying means willing God’s will, which is love. Anything short of this is a sort of [robbery]”.<sup>2</sup> All our discreet acts of praying feed and serve this greater purpose. This is the work of the soul, and of the Church, and this principle of divine – human exchange should also order the life of the city. Or, in the words of the Epistle, ***OWE no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*** Everything else is just a commentary on this law. I won’t pretend that this is simple, indeed it is just a beginning, but it does establish the principle.

The need for this all-encompassing transformation displays an even more fundamental need for the reformation of the Temple, a problem which could not be fixed by a new code regulating the exchange of currency. Rather, it is likely that the zeal which Christ displays reveals the insufficiency of the sacrificial system. On the one hand, the first books of the Old Testament give careful instructions for ordering the worship of the people of Israel, and offering daily and yearly round of sacrifices. The sacrificial system was a constant reminder of the divide between God’s justice and the human corruption of that justice, and costly gift of life which somehow bridges this gap. But the Old Testament also insists that the sacrificial system temporary, insufficient, incomplete, and open to corruption.<sup>3</sup> Something new is needed, and this is the work of the Christ. For example, from the lesson from Isaiah at Morning Prayer today:

What purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

... Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; ...

... Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil. (Isaiah 1.11, 13, 15)

Without the fulfilment of the law to which the sacrifices point, they are vain. The external is meant to manifest the internal, not merely to replace it.

The image on the front of your bulletins is from a 14<sup>th</sup> c Latin Bible depicting the siege of Jerusalem. John Donne makes a city under siege an picture of the problem which our Lord encounters in the Temple. How might we cast off the works of darkness, how

---

1 ‘Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days.’ ‘With his resurrection the new Temple will begin: the living body of Jesus Christ, which will now stand in the sight of God and be the place of all worship. Into this body he incorporates men.’ Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 43

2 *Advent Meditations*, Rev’d Dr. Robert D. Crouse, Originally presented for the Prayer Book Society of Canada, Nova Scotia/Prince Edward Island Branch Advent 2002 Institute, held at St. George’s Round Church, November 30, 2002. <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/advent1/Crouse1to4.html>

3 See Spirit of the Liturgy, 39-43.

might the commerce of our souls and our communities be ordered by love? In Donne's poem, *Batter my heart*, the problem is not that the enemy is at the gates, or surrounding the walls, but rather, that the town and temple that Christ wishes to enter has given its allegiance to another power. Donne's poem is a prayer that Christ would indeed come to the Holy city, come to his soul:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,  
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.

If reason is captive, then how can we even see what we need? It's not just enough to screw up the power of our wills to do the right thing, to cast off the works of darkness, Donne describes a will not strong enough to act: *I, like an usurp'd town to another due, Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;*

His will is not enough, hence his plea that God would will for him and in him: *Batter my heart, ... break, burn, blow, make me new.* This is the same sensibility we find in words of our confession, a longing for freedom and an awareness of weakness: *the remembrance is grievous, the burden intolerable...* we know ourselves to need rescuing.

When we meet here to worship week by week, it is this more profound problem that we are addressing. How may the life of our community, how may our souls, be re-ordered and made new, so that we owe no one anything but to love one another? The liturgy is both an act of worship, but also an invitation into a movement which transforms and purifies our love, a movement which takes place within the movement of God coming to us, revealing Himself to us, and drawing us to Himself.

In a basic way, we are invited to respond in the way John Donne responds – to invite the one who comes to his holy city and to his temple, to invite Him into His Church and into our souls. We pray that we may hear him addressing us now, not some distant past or impossible future, but addressing us, we pray that we may recognize him meek and lowly in the frail forms of human words which carry him, and in the sacramental signs, the meek and lowly signs of bread and wine by which he comes to us today. We pray some form of Donne's prayer: *Batter my heart, three-person'd God, come in where you are already. But how does it happen?*

In the Eucharistic prayer we both remember and evoke the one sacrifice of Christ, one offered, 'for the sins of the whole world'. But any 'once' or 'once offered' which is an expression of the divine will, the 'thy will be done' of Christ, can never be contained by history, it cannot be kept in the past. The 'once' of Christ becomes, or 'bears within itself' the 'always'.<sup>4</sup> This is, in part, what is evoked by speaking of the perpetual intercession of Christ, or saying that Christ 'perpetually offers and represents [his one sacrifice of Himself] to his heavenly Father'.<sup>5</sup> His gift of Himself on the cross, and in his self-giving 'this is my Body' are expressions of a divine act and reality which cannot be contained in the past.

---

<sup>4</sup> see here discussion of Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, quoting Bernard of Clairvaux in this case, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Taylor, In Tract 81, p 190

On the one hand, in the liturgy, what is past is drawn into the present, Christ coming to the Holy city, Christ giving himself on the cross, under the symbols of bread and wine, are made present. But this making present is not only in relation to the past, but to the future, or to the eternal.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the season which we have now left behind, on Trinity Sunday, a door was opened in heaven, and St John, in his vision in the book of Revelation, sees, in the words of discoverer of Tutankhamen's tomb, Howard Carter, which ITV has made new again, St John 'sees wonderful things'. Our worship both reaches out toward these wonderful things, we lift up our hearts to them, but these wonderful things are also made present to us.

In his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, that great Anglo-Catholic theologian, Benedict XVI, the pope emeritus describes the significance of what St John sees for us:

'The [Book of Revelation] Apocalypse presents this sacrificed Lamb, who lives as sacrificed, as the centre of the heavenly liturgy, a liturgy, that through Christ's sacrifice is now present in the midst of the world... (Rev 5)'<sup>7</sup>

Or, in the words of our liturgy, Behold the Lamb of God, blessed are they, are we, who are invited to this supper.<sup>8</sup>

The ceremonial of our liturgy makes sense not only in relation to what we remember, not only in relation to what we seek to do in the present, but also in relation to this future or eternal reality which is also made present in our worship, 'the Church being the image of heaven; the priest, the minister of CHRIST; the holy table being a copy of the celestial altar'.<sup>9</sup> One way of understanding the different traditions of Christian worship, or different kinds of Anglican worship, is to see them in relation to what part of this dynamic of past, present, and future which they emphasize, the remembering of the history, the gathering together in the present, or the orientation toward the future for which we hope for and which is already present. These three elements are always present in worship, but present in different ways and with different emphases.

On Tuesday, Lessons and Carols begin with Advent Antiphon: 'Go yet out to meet him and say'.<sup>10</sup> That going out is made possible by Christ first coming down, and *going in*, by the 'interior' act of his self-giving, which is the eternal reality which matches the exterior event of his being crucified. This going out to meet Christ who has come down and into the whole of human life orders our worship. We face East together because we face the one who comes with healing in his wings – we move toward Christ, toward the Lamb on the throne, toward a new paradise with its tree of life, and toward the one who first comes to us.

In our liturgy, the practical mixes with symbolic: the movement of sacred ministers before the altar, the placement of candles and their number, have both a practical and

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Now if past and present penetrate one another in this way, if the essence of the past is not simply a thing of the past but the far-reaching power of what follows in the present, then the future too is present in what happens in the liturgy, it ought to be called in its essence, an anticipation of what is to come.' (SofL, 57)

<sup>7</sup> 'This once-for-all event [the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus] has become the ever-abiding form of the liturgy. In the first stage the eternal is embodied in the what is once-for-all. The second stage is the entry of the eternal into our present moment in the liturgical action. And the third stage is the desire of the eternal to take hold of the worshipper's life and ultimately of all historical reality. The immediate event – the liturgy – makes sense and has a meaning for our lives only because it contains the other two dimensions. Past, present, and future interpenetrate and touch upon eternity.' (SofL, 60)

<sup>8</sup> *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 38

<sup>9</sup> 'The Body given in love, and the Blood given in love, have entered, through the Resurrection, into the eternity of love, which is stronger than death' *Spirit of Liturgy*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Taylor, in Pusey, Tract 81, 190

<sup>11</sup> interior/exterior, Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 56

symbolic purpose, a combined purpose which is partly ordered by the heavenly vision St. John in the book of revelation with its altar, candlesticks, incense and with the saints adoring the lamb on the throne. But once again, this is not just a game, a curiosity: even if we do not grasp all the symbols, we are nonetheless invited into a healing movement. In the sacrifice of the Word made flesh, 'He takes up into himself our suffering and hopes, all the yearning of creation, and bears it to God'.<sup>11</sup> The movement of the liturgy is an invitation into 'that transformation into love'.<sup>12</sup> The liturgy does not replace the struggle of the Christian life, in terms of John Donne's poem – our will, our prayer is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Today, we are not simply told about what it means to wake up, our Lord addresses us directly in the Gospel. More, he does not simply speak to us, he comes to us meek and lowly in the frail words of Scripture. He comes meek and lowly in the humble signs of bread and wine which become the body by which he feeds us and on which he carries us.

At the same time, Christ's judgement on the corruption of the Temple, is also a warning to us. Worship oriented to God can easily become just fooling around, in the memorable words of Benedict XVI, 'apostasy in sacral disguise'<sup>13</sup>. Again, in the words of Isaiah this morning: your incense in an abomination to me, cease to do evil, and do good. Without the call to holiness, beautiful liturgy may be 'apostasy in sacral disguise'.

We need the signs and symbols, we do not yet see the Lord, as he is.<sup>14</sup> The altar is not the goal, Christ is the goal, sacraments will cease, they lead on to something else. Even the Bible has something of this transitory character. St Augustine, who wrote countless pages commenting on the psalms, the Gospels, the OT argued when we are in full possession of faith, hope and charity, there is no more need for the Bible, we would then live in the reality, not in the time of signs.<sup>15</sup> That time, of course, is also not yet.

Week after week, celebration of the liturgy is an invitation to enter in to what God is doing – revealing himself, in history, in his word, drawing near in the sacrament of the altar, in the inner working of the spirit. Casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armour of light is first God's work in us, to reorder and make us new. This is not an easy challenge, it comes with struggle and suffering, but it is also the way to healing our wounded freedom and assimilating us to the love which both reaches down to the depths of our need and raises us up to an open heaven.

---

11 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 47

12 *ibid*, 47

13 *ibid*, 23

14 See *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 60-61. Benedict discusses the shadow (OT), image (NT and the age of the Church) and reality 'stages of fulfilment' earlier in the chapter, 54 – 57.

15 Augustine *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.39.43: 'And thus a man who is resting upon faith, hope and love, and who keeps a firm hold upon these, does not need the Scriptures except for the purpose of instructing others. Accordingly, many live without copies of the Scriptures, even in solitude, on the strength of these three graces.'