

Homily for the Wednesday after Septuagesima

A homily preached at the Low Mass in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, on Wednesday 31 January 2024, by Mr Daniel Martin-Thomas, Sacristan of Pusey House

‘And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things: now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible.’ 1 CORINTHIANS 9.25

MAY I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We have come to the Gesimas: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, the time of waiting, of expectation, of dwelling on the manifestation of God incarnate comes to an end (in fact with Candlemas on Friday) and gives way to a time of dwelling on God’s saving work in this world and our salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ – we look forward, as we go on our pilgrimage through Lent, to Easter.

Septuagesima is the first day on which we begin to prepare for Lent, hence the vestments and altar frontals being purple. In the early church, it was considered to be the first day of Lent, when catechumens would first come into church, on their pilgrimage of being catechised, before finally being baptised on Easter Day. So these lessons (which are ancient) would most likely have been the first these catechumens heard on their pilgrimage, and we too each year are told the story of our salvation, along with those who have not heard it before.

Our collect is Lenten in its theme – we examine our hearts (*we, who are justly punished for our offences*), but we examine them through the light of Christ (*that we may be delivered by God’s goodness, for the glory of his name*). Our inclination to sin is very much in our minds: our Epistle shines light on this inclination – St Paul warns us, warns himself, to continue to run the race lest we should become, as he says, castaways. We must be temperate, we must take this race seriously. An athlete in a race has to train seriously, with discipline. How much more us, when our reward is an incorruptible crown, the crown which we will cast before God as we worship Him for eternity?

The Psalmist shines some light on what this crown might be, in Psalm 8:
What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
And the son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels,
And hast crowned him with glory and honour.

We are crowned because we are children of God. But in our sin, we turn against God, and if our crowns are crowns of righteousness, we lose them. Christ comes into our suffering, takes our crown of suffering upon himself, the crown of thorns upon the cross, which becomes the crown of martyrdom - Look at the Rood up there! - and restores the damaged image, restores us to being sons and daughters of God, co-heirs with Him, so that, when He is crowned with glory and honour, so are we!

The writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews 2:9) interprets the Psalmist thus: 'But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.'

So, we know that by His death we are restored to being sons and daughters of the living God. But we so often condemn ourselves as though this were not the case. I certainly do. I see my sins as shameful, the way I treat others, the way I struggle to pray, the way I think evil of people. And sometimes I struggle to confess my sins: slowly, they grasp hold of me, and I struggle to draw near to God. But God has tasted death, has tasted our shame, has entered into our suffering. He knows what we face. Sometimes I am ashamed to go to confession, to admit that I have slipped up again. But this is the nature of sin, that it keeps telling us that God's grace is not for us. I tell you, and I tell myself, particularly, that it is for you, it is for me. Each of us is unworthy of it. But God offers it to us. Each of us is unworthy of the crown of righteousness. But Christ crowns us with His righteousness. Each of us, whether recent catechumens, or Christians all our lives, receives the same grace. Whether we have worked in the vineyard for the whole day, or have only come into it at the eleventh hour, we belong to Christ, and we are given His crown. So let us approach Easter with joy: our sins are nailed to Christ's cross. Let us take our sins to Him: we are redeemed. Let us pray that we would see ourselves as our Father in Heaven sees us, as His children, co-heirs with His Son Jesus Christ, crowned with glory and honour.

Amen.