

Homily for the Feast of St Nicholas

*A homily preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament,
Pusey House, Oxford, at the Low Mass on Wednesday, 6
December 2023 (The Feast of St Nicholas), by Mr Calum
Mullett, Ordinand, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford*

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

St Nicholas of Myra, whom we celebrate today, must be the most widely and yet bizarrely celebrated saint in the English-speaking world, possibly the entire globe.

Which other Saint has depictions of his face covering decorations, adverts, and films from October until the end of December? His recasting in a red fur coat, white beard and hat are now the epitome of Christmas and he is a globally recognised symbol of the holiday.

In countries like China and Japan, where few celebrate the festival with any Christian background, Santa symbolises Christmas.

Confusingly, the American Santa Claus has also become conflated with and absorbed the previously unrelated Father Christmas of English folk tradition. Father Christmas is now just Santa Claus with an English accent.

Yet, despite the wide celebration of Saint Nicholas, we would all too quickly acknowledge that the Santa Claus of the modern commercial Christmas has little to do with his 4th century namesake.

It is as though there are two Saint Nicholas', the Saint Nicholas of Myra, and Santa Claus.

In 2010, Philip Pullman, the well known writer and secular humanist, published *The Good Man Jesus, and the scoundrel Christ*.

The book reimagines the Gospels, telling of Jesus, a good, kind, simple preacher of love, and His twin brother Christ who wishes to turn the following his brother has attracted to his own power and glory.

Though I, of course, reject the New Atheism lurking behind Pullman's anti-Christian fable, his Good Man and Scoundrel trope could instead map onto the figures of the real St Nicholas and the imagined Santa Claus.

Like Pullman's scoundrel Christ, Santa is stealing St Nicholas' good name, and using it for an unholy end.

Now don't misunderstand me: I'm not trying to be a Scrooge, or tell you that we shouldn't tell children about Father Christmas. Father Christmas is a wonderful analogy of God's love and gift in Christ and can be a great lesson in faith for children.

And yet, we must ask ourselves: what is the point of celebrating Saint Nicholas, and why does the Church celebrate him at this point of the year in Advent?

The reason, I want to suggest, can be found in our scripture readings. In our Epistle, the Apostle Paul exhorts us to 'godliness with contentment'.

We should be content with what we have, not longing for great wealth, power or gain, but thankfully seeking after 'godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.'

St Paul says, 'the love of money is the root of all evil'. This inordinate love begs us to acquire as much as we can for ourselves. It is a great snare which turns our eyes away from God and closes us off from the need of others.

St Paul also writes, 'For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.'

We are like the grass of the field that will perish; all that we gain here, we cannot take with us. Our frail bodies find no redemption in ourselves; only in God can we find salvation.

The point of Advent is to remind us to wait patiently for God, not hoping and striving after the things of this world, which can only disappoint and delude us.

Instead, we will only be satisfied in God Himself, and we will only find true fulfilment when Christ comes again to this world, as truly as He was born in first-century Bethlehem.

We are saved only by God's grace in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, which we are called to respond to in faith and obedience. By faith, we wait on Christ to judge the world, finally destroying sin and death, and putting all things right.

The tragedy of Santa Claus is that he epitomises the period of excessive consumerism which has replaced the Christian seasons of Advent and Christmas. He represents a season of indulgence and instant gratification.

His role is the antithesis of what we should take from the example of St Nicholas' life.

The real St Nicholas of Myra, from all we can say of his life, was surely the kind of man so filled with the Love of God, who waited on and was sustained by his creator, that he could give abundantly and richly to those in need.

In our Gospel reading, we see Christ welcoming the most weak and vulnerable, the children. Often side-lined and hidden in the ancient world, Jesus embraces them and gives them His time and blessing. This example was followed by St Nicholas with great commitment.

Yet we must do more than welcome the vulnerable. Jesus says we must be like children ourselves; we must approach God with simple faith and trust, as a child to a perfectly good and loving Father.

I am not calling or clamouring for the abolition of Father Christmas. For the way children are filled with excitement for Father Christmas is how we should be filled with joy, excitement, hope and wonder for the coming of Christ in our lives, and at the end of time to judge and save the world.

And yet, in order to be ready for when God himself comes and to receive him like children, the Church wisely advises we ready ourselves.

The ancient tradition of the Church is to do that by keeping the season of Advent well.

Every year we are reminded in sermons to keep Advent well. We all nod along and agree heartily. But it seems that, as soon as we go away home, none of us do anything differently, and we all just continue binge-eating our way to Christmas.

We cannot just talk of keeping Advent well and then go on with the Christmas rush as normal. We are to keep the Spirit of the season.

St Paul in our Epistle says: “O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.”

‘Tis the season’ to flee from indulgence and sin, and to follow after righteousness, as we wait for Christ to return soon.

But how do we follow after righteousness? How do we allow God to form us, sanctify us, change us, so that we are ready for his appearing in glory?

Advent calls us to three things: Firstly, renewed commitment to turning away from our besetting sins, as we remember Christ will come unexpectedly. Secondly, giving up for a time some things which are good, to remind us of our need for God and of His goodness, and our need to rely on Him alone. Thirdly, taking up those practices of greater time spent in the scriptures, in prayer and in silence before God.

Advent is not Lent. The focus *is* different and Advent is rightly a more joyful season. Yet just because it is not Lent, does not mean it is not a penitential season, or that therefore keeping it does not look a little bit like Lent.

What the church holds out to us in Advent is the advice that we should actively try and give up something which is not in itself bad. If we are able to, it is especially appropriate to give up some kind of food, whether that is going vegetarian, or abstaining from sweets and desserts except on Sundays, or committing certain days to intermittent fasting, or giving up alcohol.

In giving up good things, such as kinds of foods, we remind ourselves that all we really need is God. We strengthen our willpower to reject the things we desire and instead pray for more desire for God. We can also pray that the Holy Spirit would help us to reject those sins that separate us from God. That we would more readily submit to the sanctification God is working in us by his grace.

And we do this alongside a firmer commitment to personal prayer, scripture reading, and meditation, praying that God would refine us and reform us more into the image of the Christ who was born at Bethlehem.

By allowing ourselves to give up that which we do not need, we open ourselves to being filled more richly by God's presence.

We ready ourselves to celebrate our Lord's coming again, which will come as surely as Christ came before.

And once Christmas day has come, let us not stop the feast there like our bizarre consumerist culture does, with such a great build-up and then an abrupt end on the evening of the 25th of December. But let us strive to keep all of Advent with fasting and then all the twelve days of Christmas with feasting: seeing family and friends, attending church more often, maybe even try spreading opening your presents out over the twelve days.

Let us set apart Advent to God, asking Him to ready us, so that we might wait like small children, listening out in the night for the jingle of Father Christmas' sleighbells, filled with fear and excitement that soon he shall come.

Infinitely greater than the hopes of the children waiting for Father Christmas's toys, we await Christ, who shall come and give us the gift of His very self, that we might be with him in the fullness of his love for evermore.

Amen.