

Homily for the Feast of St Lucy

A homily preached at the Low Mass in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, on Wednesday, 13 December 2023 (The Feast of St Lucy), by Mr David Sten, Chapel Intern, Pusey House

DURING the Reformation in my native Sweden, most saints' days were promptly removed. One deeply ingrained in the customs of the Swedes, however, survived. The feast day of St Lucy continued to be celebrated on 13th December and continues to be to this very day. In schools, in nursing homes, at workplaces, and in churches: all over Sweden, processions in her honour are taking place. First in the procession is walking the saint herself, dressed in white and with a crown of burning candles on her head. The crown is representing that given to the martyrs as a reward, but also the halo with which the saints are traditionally depicted, the golden disc surrounding the saint's head. Before the 17th century it was known as simply "glory", a name that it retains in the Swedish, and which - better than the word halo - speaks of its true significance. It is nothing other than the radiance of God's glory, the uncreated light which shone forth at Mount Tabor, now shining forth from the saints. It is about this central point of the meaning of sainthood I wish to speak to you this evening.

I would like to suggest that the crown adorned with candles comes even closer to signifying the nature of the radiance surrounding the saints than does the standard halo. As we have already noted, it being a crown reminds us of the crowns promised to the saints in, for instance, 1 Peter 5:4. Today, however, we are focusing on the nature of the halo and the crown as fire. On this point, it is fitting to turn to our Gospel text for the day. In Matthew's 25th chapter, Christ tells a parable of ten virgins. Five were wise and stored up enough oil to keep the fire burning until the bridegroom came. Five were foolish and had not enough oil to keep their lamps lit, and were subsequently forbidden from entering the feast. The feast is the one promised to Christians when Christ returns, and the bridegroom is Christ Himself.

The choice of Matthew 25 as the appointed reading for the feast of St Lucy suggests that St Lucy is to be seen as one of the five wise virgins who had brought enough oil to be ready for the coming of Christ the Bridegroom. This is indeed a very fitting comparison, for St Lucy showed herself sufficiently prepared for the coming of the bridegroom, as she came to him through death as a martyr. When presented with the choice of denying her saviour and abandoning her consecration to virginhood, or facing death, she showed herself as one having stored up enough oil, and, through death, was taken to the Bridegroom Himself. But how was it that she was prepared? In the parable, we see that being prepared is to have sufficient oil so as to keep the fire burning.

Both fire and oil are common biblical symbols for the Holy Spirit, and, indeed, this has tended to be the interpretation, especially among the Eastern saints and Fathers. The five virgins could enter into the feast because they were filled with the Holy Spirit, lighting up the path to the marriage feast and the Bridegroom himself. Not unlike the Apostles at Pentecost, where the Spirit that was poured into their hearts shone forth like tongues of fire, and the path of God was preached to those at Jerusalem. Like the five wise virgins, and like the apostles at Pentecost, St Lucy had received the Holy Spirit into her heart, and He was as a burning fire in her, lighting the up the path of martyrdom through which she came into the feast. This fire and light is what the burning candles in St Lucy's crown symbolises. Still, we need to go further to understand fully why we crown St Lucy with a crown of burning candles. All those who have received the Spirit, bestowed by God through the laying on of hands and the anointing which we carry out during our baptism liturgy, have been illumined by the Spirit. Yet we do not crown them with crowns of burning candles, nor do we depict them with halos. In Luke 11:33-36 Christ speaks of the light of the body:

“No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light. The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness. Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness. If thy whole body therefore be full of light,

having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light.”

We see here that there can be things in us that quench the light within us so that it will not illumine us entirely, nor be allowed to shine forth. That can be sin, or the disordered passions. Why St Lucy is adorned with a crown of candles and the saints with halos then is because, as saints, they are the ones in whom the Spirit has polished away the grime, illumining them entirely, and letting the light shine forth from within them into the world. By the very fact that we are commemorating St Lucy today, we see her light shine forth, reaching even us in the here and now. The lives of the saints speak boldly of the path to God, to the marriage feast, and to the Bridegroom. St Lucy received the call of God, was consecrated to life as a Virgin, pursuing God above all else. She would not give Him up for anything, neither would she bow to the threat of death. The crown on St Lucy’s head is the fire of the Holy Spirit shining in her and through her for all the world to see. When we see the light radiating from her, we can let her illumine our path also, seeking to walk in her footsteps. We, like her, must receive the Holy Spirit and let Him lead us on the path towards Christ the Bridegroom, transforming us so that no passion or sin or danger can keep us from Christ. The life of St Lucy also becomes a call to, like her, be people wearing the light of the Spirit, leading lives on the divinely illumined path in such a way as to also light up the paths of others.

I would like to end by praying along with the church through the centuries in the traditional *Veni Sancte Spiritus*:

“Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and kindle in them the fire of Thy love.

Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created.

And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray.

O God, Who did instruct the hearts of Thy faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit,

grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise, and ever to rejoice in His consolation.

Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”