

Second Sunday of Christmas

Hanslope Confirmation, 3 January 2021

Sirach 24.1-2, 8-12; *Ephesians* 1.3-6, 15-18; *John* 1.1-18

Dear friends: once again we have heard the profound and universal opening of the Gospel of St John. Why? Don't we know it well enough by now? It's as if we are being pressed to look deeper at it. We're not being allowed to rush away from Christmas, into the New Year (as if that means anything to a Christian mind), or into the next disaster scenario that is being pumped out on the news. We're being made to peer, to ponder, and to puzzle our way through a great mystery. Something that's simply too big for our minds to grasp all at once. A meaning and a truth so big we can only ever get our arms round bits of it now and then.

1

But what the Church is asking us to do this morning, keeping us gazing at the Mother and her Divine Child, *is good*. Being made to stick with Christmas when the world has rushed on to the next thrilling distraction *is good!* Thinking on the Word becoming human flesh, being born from a virgin womb, *is good!* And St Augustine gives us a hint as to why.

He distinguished between two ways of celebrating an event in the story of Jesus Christ. We can do it either as a *mystery* (the Latin word he uses is '*sacramento*'), or as a simple commemoration, like you would a birthday, the end of a war, or a great tragedy. To celebrate an anniversary like that, he said, we only need to mark a particular day with a solemn ceremony of some sort, on a particular day, and remember. To celebrate a *mystery*, though, that is a different ball-game. 'Not only is the *event* commemorated, but the *remembering is done a different way*' he says, 'so that *it's significance for us* is understood and received in our hearts as well as our minds.' [Letter 55.1-2]

Governments and shopping malls make the mistake of thinking that Christmas is a celebration of the first sort. We've seen the proof! When you have to you can *cancel* that kind of anniversary; even bits of the Church seem to have been thinking that Christmas was cancellable in that way! **But the Church knows that Christmas is a celebration of the second sort: a mystery that needs to be understood in terms of its significance for us.** St Leo the Great (a contemporary of Augustine) hits the nail on the head, "Just as we have been *crucified* with him in his passion, been *raised* with him in his resurrection (which we'll hear a good deal about later in this service) so too have we been *born* along with him in his Nativity." [Leo the Great, Homily on the Feast of the Incarnation, 6.2]

2

What I want to highlight this morning then, is the fact that although God's eternal wisdom and purpose is never less than for the *whole creation* (not just for a bit of it, or for people like us, or even just for *people* at all), he has consistently chosen to reveal that wise purpose through *specific* places and circumstances, through a particular race and people, and through actual individuals. We all owe our existence to the one Creator's ageless plan; but the reality and the truth about him has been revealed to the world in specific, individual human lives. Individuals throughout the old testament, individuals in the circle around Mary; in Joseph; in Mary herself with such amazing consequences; and of course in the one man Jesus Christ, the one who showed us that, out of love for the whole world, *God's love for humanity extends all the way* to giving up his Beloved Son to death. What it all shows us is that God wants to unite us to him, and guarantee our freedom from sin and death in a lasting love affair between the Creator and us his creatures.

And this is precisely what St Paul says in our second reading. He's writing about God's ageless plan for all creation; and then he suddenly says that he wants the Christians in Ephesus to *understand* what has been revealed 'so that you may know the hope

to which he has called you', and the riches believers will inherit, and the immeasurable power available to them (*Eph* 1.18b-19). This is what Christians are trying to do Christmas: trying to get our heads and our arms around the hope to which he has called us! called specifically *us*, and the will of God for us, a hope specifically *for us*, which in turn will reveal God's life and truth to others.

3

Which brings us to a moment concentrating on our candidates for baptism and confirmation, not to embarrass them, or to pile expectations on their personal experience today. Rather in order to remind ourselves, through them, that God *continues* to reveal himself, and his universal plan, through the lives of individuals, families, communities, times and places: in people in and around this community, people like us and people not very 'like us' at all, and **he does it by bringing Jesus to birth in each one of us, and changing each of us to be like him.**

4

There is a big bold question about Christmas that returns generation after generation among believers and in the thinking of the Church's pastors and teachers. '*What possible good does it do me, what difference does it make, that Jesus Christ was born of Mary once in Bethlehem, if he is not born by faith in my heart as well?*' [That's pretty much what Origen asks, for example, in his Sermon 22. There are many more examples one could find.] Echoing this ancient question, in his Christmas message of 1962, then-pope St John XXIII, prayed these words:

O eternal Word of the Father, Son of God and Son of Mary, renew again today *in the secret recesses of our hearts* the wonderful marvel of your birth.

Jesus is not *only* born 'for' us, but **must also be born 'in' us in our hearts and minds and flesh and wills.** This truth is at the heart of all Jesus's words and actions, and if we had more time we

could explore it better as one of the great themes of the NT, and historic Church teaching. But we haven't; and so if you want to see the back of this sermon you'll just have to trust me on that one! Suffice to say that every action in this Mass is based on it that idea: our gathering, our listening to the scriptures – listening even to this sermon! – the baptisms, confirmations and the Eucharist which will follow.

5

The Holy Spirit invites us, this morning, if I can pick up some more words from St Augustine, to '*return to our hearts*' [see *Confessions* 4.19] and in them to celebrate a more intimate and true Christmas, one that **begins to make more real in your life** (whether you are a new or an older believer, a lay person or a priest or a bishop) the Christmas we celebrate in rituals and tradition; one that celebrates the *mystery* not just the anniversary.

God's Will – from the very beginning – was for his Word to grow in us. Mary assures us that that is God's Will and Way. Jesus himself desires to be born in our hearts. It's as if he is walking among us, going door to door, knocking, like that night in Bethlehem, in search of a heart in which he can be born spiritually.

If you are devout, dissatisfied with life, spurred on by inspiration, or want to put aside old faults and habits, you can *conceive* Christ as the Virgin Mary did. But it has to grow as flesh and blood – your flesh and blood, your thoughts and plans, your habits and service toward others – or that conception will *miscarry*.

Worse still, turning away from Christ and preferring sin or unbelief will bring any growth to an end. Such things cause, as it were, a kind of spiritual abortion, one of the countless postponements of God's Will that litter all our lives, and are one of the main reasons so few people become saints.

If, like the Virgin Mary, or indeed St Joseph, you do decide to embrace the mystery, to change your lifestyle, and live by new priorities, you will of course face temptation. Either, 'This is all too hard; you'll never be able to do it; it will harm your reputation.' Or

'You deceive no one; you are a hypocrite; forget it, just be like the rest of us'. To all these temptations for the growth of Christ in us it is necessary only to respond in faith, like Mary, like Jesus, 'Our Father: thy will be done on earth', now, in me, for your glory, 'as it is in heaven'.

Prayer

We fly to Thy protection,
O Holy Mother of God;
Do not reject our prayers
in our necessities,
but always deliver us
from all dangers,
O Glorious and Blessed Virgin.

original Greek, 3rd century