FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD St John 3:13-17

Happy Feast!

Today is not only the Feast of the Birth of the Mother of God but also the Sunday before the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross. In the Gospel which we have just heard, Christ speaks of himself being lifted up, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness – a reference to his crucifixion. But the reference has another meaning as well, since in the tradition recorded in the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses, or rather given by God, was a life-giving force to save those who had been bitten by the fiery serpents which the God of Israel had sent among them in the desert because of their hardness of heart towards him. Those afflicted with bites could look at the serpent and live. Christ continues this theme and says that those who look at him and believe on him when he is lifted up similarly will have eternal life. The next verse continues the theme of faith in Christ and is no doubt familiar to many of us, “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This verse challenges us again not so much in terms of belief, since by our presence here it is apparent that we all believe in the one “who loved us and gave himself for us,” but rather in how we relate it to the world around us: to our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and particularly post-Christian, religiously pluralistic and sexually diverse society. How can we square this with the other great religions which are increasingly represented in our society? How can we expand our picture of God to take these into our perception of God and the world? One thing is clear about the religious life: at the psychological and spiritual level this breaking of boundaries and images of God is something which we have to do regularly and is in fact forced on us constantly by God in our spiritual journey, since nothing stands still in our relationship with Him. This passage into a deeper phase of our journey often comes in the form of a crisis, major or minor, and questionings and if we persist and remain faithful leaves us with an enhanced and deeper awareness of God. As I have said before it is closely tied up with the injunction of the Buddhists to kill God (not literally of course but the limited perception we have built up of him) in order that he may live more fully in us. Embracing our doubts as the doorway into this deeper experience of God is crucial to our spiritual growth. It offers us the possibility of leaving what St Paul calls the ‘milk stage’ in our development and moving on to the ‘meat stage’. There are inherent dangers here when we question something important if we do not undertake this questioning with honesty and sincerity of heart and place our intellect arrogantly above the received teaching of the Church and veer into heresy like many of the early heretics of the Church. Recently I heard a replay of the famous incident in the 80s when lightning struck and destroyed a major part of the beautiful building of York Minster. As you may know the then Archbishop announced that he did not believe in the literal resurrection of Christ nor in the Virgin Birth and many attributed the event to this heretical statement. This is why when we honestly seek clarification of important traditional doctrines standing in awe and wonder before God in nature or in the world is so important for us since it removes the barriers and opens us up to simply marvelling at God. And it reminds us of the statements of the Fathers that the only place where God can really live in us is in or hearts because they are limitless like God himself and seek to know him in a deeper way.

We must start in our comprehension of other religions with an understanding and a profound respect for them since in some way they are a revelation of God. Any other approach seems to me both naïve and unrealistic. Over 70 years ago the great Romanian historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, through assiduous study and a deep, sensitive understanding of the creeds and modes of spirituality, was able to point to common elements in the forms of prayer for example the mantra-like repetition of the name of Jesus and the tradition of the Sufi, the ascetical practices and at the highest level, the yearning for the presence of God. So there are many similarities, as we might expect, often such that I sometimes think the Orthodox faith is closer to Islam than to Protestantism in certain aspects of its practice. And you may know that many Church Fathers, on hearing of Islam and its tenets for the first time, concluded that it was simply another Christian heresy. So we must start with a respect for the other religions, correctly understood and not as exhibited by narrow fundamentalist or terrorist sects, recognise the good works they do and search for common elements in our traditions and show a willingness to learn from them. For example, as far as I know the Sikh temple is still the only place of worship where you can get a free meal every day and where the feeding of the poor is regarded as a religious obligation.

But the more I study the other faiths the more I see differences too and particularly the insurmountable obstacle that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”. The idea of God entering the world just cannot be comprehended by those outside. It is unpalatable and becomes unacceptable, since after the miracles performed by Jesus in overcoming the natural order through healings of the sick, multiplying food, walking on water and raising the dead, he reduces himself to the status not only of a servant but of a criminal in the manner of his death. And before his death Christ appears as a fool in the way he is mocked by the guards, dressed in fine purple, laughed at, beaten and spat upon. No all this is too much for many for a credible God. It is simply unacceptable and unbecoming. Many of the Fathers say that the tradition of holy fools in Christianity began here. And if we have difficulty in accepting some of these characters who ‘played the fool’ by tying a dead dog to a waistband and flicking peanuts at a preacher during his sermon but who spent their nights consumed in prayer, imagine how difficult it was for the disciples to make sense of what was going on after the arrest of Jesus and how hard it is for others to accept a God who dies. But St Paul reminds us that “the word of the Cross is folly to those who are dying but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”. Our perception of Christ is very different from those of other religions who respect him but put him in the pantheon or line of prophets with other great teachers and spiritual leaders. No. As St Peter confesses, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”.

But if this is the case, then what humility and repentance is required of us since we, as members of the Church, have shown by our actions that we have missed the point. We have failed to serve and thus follow in the footsteps of Christ. Our calling in Christ is all about living a life which bears witness to the truth of what we hold and in that we have manifestly fallen short of the target. Our attitude to other religions should rather be, “Take the treasures which God has given us in Christ and live by them. We are unworthy of them as our deeds have shown’.

But let me conclude with the uplifting words of Christ in today’s Gospel. “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” In the life of Christ it is others, especially the scribes and Pharisees who condemn Christ. “He has gone to eat with sinners.” “If he were a prophet he would have known that this woman is a great sinner.” But the words of Christ are not like this. They are positive, forgiving and life-giving. “Today salvation has come to this house. For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.” And that is us.

Happy Feast!

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