

THURSDAY

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First Things

Fr David



The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

St John begins his Gospel with these words, and many scholars argue that he intended that the whole of his Gospel be read through the lens of these few words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Nicodemus, the protagonist in our Gospel lesson, is one of those people who walk in darkness. Earlier in the story John tells us Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, not just because he was trying to hide from the authorities but because he was in the dark in more ways than one.

Throughout his whole dialogue with Jesus, Nicodemus remains confused. I like the old translation, *the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot comprehend it*. The darkness of this world (the darkness of human understanding) can't understand Christ, and it can't overcome him either.

St Paul, similarly, is writing from prison to the Christians in Philippi emphasizing how they have not understood Jesus, just as Nicodemus had not.

The Cross is a stumbling block to the Jews, St Paul once wrote, and to the Gentiles it is foolishness. Nevertheless, he says, we preach Christ crucified.

It is this stumbling block, this foolishness, which we celebrate this coming Monday, on this feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Our lessons for this feast have another thing in common, and it stems from this very foolishness that we are confronting. Both our readings suggest that what is required, when approaching the mystery of Christ, and the mystery of the Cross - is a fundamental conversion in the way we think about everything.

Jesus emphasizes that people must change so utterly that they are born from above, born again, born in a heavenly way before they can see the kingdom.

The Benedictine order -- the order that planted this parish so many centuries ago, has "conversion of life" as one of its core rules. It doesn't mean a one time only deal but a daily, hourly, minute by minute conversion.

The Christian life is nothing else but this ongoing conversion. I wrote last Sunday about Love. There is no measure of anything, no meaningful measure of anything, apart from love. This is so true, that our Lord and the Apostles were insistent that everything else, except love, is sin.

For this to mean anything, I admitted, we need to understand what love is. The Apostle's recognized that in our Lord's teaching on love, what was being offered to them (and to us, and to the whole world), what not a new morality, nor even a new religion -- what was being offered was a whole new way of being, a whole new way of existing as a human person, in the world. Being baptised into Christ was truly to be born again. To partake of the Sacrament is truly to eat the bread of heaven - it is a totally other, totally new way of being. The Christian life is an ongoing conversion to love, by love.

And this Monday we get a glimpse of what this love is. Christ crucified. This is why the symbol of Christ crucified is everywhere for us as Christians. It is the revelation first, of God's love for us. And therefore, it is a revelation of what the true nature of love really is. Its essence is in the emptying of ourselves. And so Paul holds up Christ himself as our example:

*His state was divine, yet Christ Jesus did not cling
to his equality with God but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are;
and being as all men are, he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death, death on a cross.*

Forgive Seventy Times Seven, *By Jan Hearn*



JH

Expositio Lectionis Dominicae

This Sunday's lessons

Fr Tomas



Forgiveness

Resentment and anger, these are foul things... The first reading this Sunday is from the apocryphal book Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), a book of wisdom sayings, and it leads us from the Hebrew Scriptures to the Gospel. It can be understood as a prologue about the teaching of Our Lord on what it means to be forgiven. The practice of forgiving is encouraged by referring to the last days of one's life, to the commandments and to being a member of the people with whom God has entered into a covenant. God is merciful and we are invited to remember God's forgiving us when we are presented with the option of mercy or justice in response to our being injured.

The Gospel sets further emphasis on forgiving. Peter asks the Lord about forgiveness and wants to get an exact reply. But Jesus's

answer is not exact as Peter would hope for. Nevertheless, it is very clear. An example of a king who forgave a man a great debt is brought up; however, this man turned and didn't forgive a fellow debtor for a smaller amount. The ending is very dramatic when the king of the story hands the forgiven, yet unforgiving man, over to the torturers until the debt be paid. We are told in

If God is merciful, we must be merciful too... forgiveness lies at the centre of our faith.

very clear terms that if we do not forgive others their sins against us, God is going to throw us into eternal pain with no way out.

We are aware of our sinful nature. The closer one grows to an awareness of a God,

the closer one becomes aware of acting against our precious relationship with Him. The more we realise that God's love is ultimate, the more we realise that we disregard it too often. Sometimes this disregard goes further and becomes a violation. Sin is so much about breaking a rule, a traffic offense on the road to Heaven which results in a painful ticket, sin is also assuming the role of God, playing heavenly Police. It is not being aware of one's place, one's limitations and pretending that what we think is right must be actually right.

If God is merciful, we must be merciful too. Too many people have a strong sense of strict justice (especially those at the extreme ends of Christianity), yet forgiveness lies at the centre of our faith. Deep in our psyches we feel that we are obliged simply to treat others in the same manner they treat us.

The Gospel is so clear that it almost embarrasses us. Forgiving from the heart is the invitation, but it is so hard to respond. Injury seems to call for redress and provides a subtle, tempting power to the injured.

Each of us can for sure think of people whom we have not forgiven. Yet, forgiving is not the same as forgetting them. Likewise, asking for forgiveness for our trespasses – as individuals, or as members of a community, as a nation – does not mean forgetting who we are and where we come from. Forgiveness is not an act of public shaming of the sinner and, likewise, asking for forgiveness with a sincere, contrite heart is not an act of self-flagellation.

Nothing is more central to Jesus's message than forgiveness of enemies. Knowing that for many it might be the hardest part of his teaching, Jesus even found it appropriate to include in the prayer he taught his disciples. Now they would be reminded daily: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us": as God forgives us daily for our sins and offenses, so must we forgive daily those who sin against and offend us.

If we follow the example of Our Lord who counsels the disciples to forgive "seventy times seven" times, i.e. always and without stint, we discover in our lives that close connection between God's forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of others. This is what makes more human, more noble and, at the same time, more God-like:

"O Christian, be aware of your nobility – it is God's own nature that you share; do not then, by an ignoble life, fall back into your former baseness." – Pope St. Leo the Great

Saint Francis of Assisi,
Philip Fruytiers, 17th C.
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp



John Dearing



The Greyfriars come to Reading

I may be biased since I worshipped during my childhood years at a church in Bournemouth dedicated to him but surely one of the most attractive characters in the annals of the mediaeval church was Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). After a somewhat frivolous youth Francis espoused a life of poverty and founded an order of brothers (friars), who became known by the colour of their habit, as the Grey Friars, distinguishing them from the Dominicans or Black Friars, who were founded about the same time. Their real name was the *Ordo Fratrum Minorum* (the order of lesser brothers.)

As they were less tied to the life of the cloister than the older monastic orders the Friars soon became an active force in the life of the church, preaching in the cities, teaching in the universities and taking the gospel to the heathen. Francis himself famously visited the Sultan Kamil in 1218 with this end in view. Perhaps less attractively they were employed in combating heresy, the Dominicans especially taking part in the work of the Inquisition.

The new orders spread far and wide across Christendom and in 1224 the first Franciscans arrived in England, establishing their first friary at Canterbury; nine years later, they arrived in Reading. The Abbot of Reading, Adam de Lathbury, granted the friars a piece of



Greyfriars interior -today

waste ground close to the river near Caversham Bridge. The site was 33 perches in length and 23 in breadth, probably around 180 x 125 yards. The friars somewhat unwisely undertook not to seek any other land or extension of the existing site from the abbey. Henry III took an interest in their welfare and allowed them draw on the resources of Windsor Forest in the construction of their church and 'before the winter of 1239, the Sheriff was instructed to purchase 52 ells of russet to make tunics for the thirteen men and, in following years, wood for burning.'

St Francis was never much given to comfort and might well have approved of the somewhat unhealthy conditions the friars endured in an area subject to flooding in winter. However, by 1282 we find John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury (1279-92), himself a Franciscan, addressing the Abbot of Reading on their behalf, seeking permission to enlarge their house. This

request was somewhat grudgingly granted by the monks, and the result was a new covenant whereby:

‘The abbot and convent of Reading stated that they had unanimously received as guests the Franciscan friars in the town of Reading, upon a piece of ground..... extending from the common way called New Street, the use whereof the friars should continue to have... to build and dwell upon this additional plot of land (16½ perches by 16 perches) so long as they remained without property and, in accordance with their profession, observers of the deepest poverty.

‘The friars promised... that they would never seek any other dwelling on the land of the abbey, or extend their boundaries, and that they would never ask alms from the abbey as a due, but only out of mercy and by special grace.’

New Street, now known as Friar Street, was on higher ground and somewhat drier than the former site. The friars set to work within the area granted them ‘to rear a church suitable for the crowds who flocked to hear their zealous preaching.’ King Edward I granted 56 oaks from the forest of Windsor for the new church, which was finally completed in 1311 and is said to be the oldest Franciscan church still in use as a place of worship, although for over three hundred years it was put to secular uses, some of them rather ignoble.

Although it remained somewhat under the shadow of the abbey, at least two of the Reading friars distinguished themselves. William Boteler (died c.1416) was provincial of the order and much busied in combating the teachings of Wycliffe, writing a treatise against the translation of the Bible into English! John Latterbury (died 1406) was a scholar whose bible commentaries and other hose writings were ‘highly esteemed in his day.’

S Wilfrida
by Lucy Stothard



THE HOLY ONES

*A series on a Saint
of the week.*

Lucy Stothard



The Wayward Bride

Wilfreda, 10th C.

L*et Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth! For thy love is better than wine. Because of the savour of thy good ointments, thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee.”* So reads the opening to my favourite translation of the Song of Songs. In both Protestant and Catholic traditions, excerpts from the Song are, predictably enough, often read at weddings (always a good choice if you want to make the congregation squirm). However, the Song finds a special place in the liturgy at both religious profession and the consecration of virgins.

The idea of the nun as a Bride of Christ is one which has helped thousands of women and girls throughout the history of the Church make sense of their vocation. By “taking the veil” and joining herself to the Lord in a union which is chaste, spousal and fruitful, a woman does indeed enter into a spiritual marriage. She becomes a spiritual mother, a living image of the Church itself.

It’s no wonder such beautiful and transcendent imagery has persisted throughout the ages. However, it becomes problematic when we associate the habit and veil with perfection already achieved (or perhaps, even, innate), rather than virtue striven for on a daily or even momentary basis. It risks becoming a symbol of perceived

superiority rather than a covering of humility.

The innumerable pieces of art which depict various female saints in their habits, wimples and veils don't help. If we're not careful, it can feed into a belief that nuns and sisters are somehow mystical, other. They aren't.

And that's part of what makes them so delightful.

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might have taken,
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herself outside the realm
of God's tender mercy –
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During my own
discernment journey
I've had the privilege of
getting to know numerous
nuns and sisters, from
England and beyond.
Sister Anna (not her real
name) was the first. She'd
studied philosophy at
a prestigious university
and was far from being
a sheltered flower. She
made no secret of the fact
that she thought that the
particularly sinful women
were the ones who ended

up in convents, under vows: "We're the ones that need it!" Then there was Gabrielle, a postulant – filled with Provençal exuberance and horrified at the thought that God might be calling her to a life of, in her own words, "no sex". But Sister Charlotte was my favourite. She hadn't entered the convent until she'd been thirty-eight years old. She'd travelled extensively. And she had a tattoo on her foot. I knew she had stories to tell.

Nevertheless, when I asked about her relationship with the Lord, Charlotte positively glowed. “The image of Christ as Bridegroom always resonated with me,” she confessed. “But since entering the convent, I’ve fallen even more in love with Him.”

Perhaps this is precisely the point. Far from being an end, the religious life is one of restoration and renewal; it entails a kind of becoming whereby the nun flourishes into the woman she was always intended to be. And this phenomenon is far from new, as the life of this week’s Holy One shows.

Saint Wilfrida was a tenth-century Englishwoman about whom we don’t know a great deal. Tellingly, she’s remembered for having had an adulterous affair with King Edgar, to whom she bore a child. It’s at this point that the narratives diverge: some sources assert that Wilfrida took the veil as a means of doing penance for her sins. Others, more scandalously, suggest that the affair took place when she was already professed, with Edgar having stolen her from the convent (presumably to return her at a later date).

Whichever road she might have taken, Wilfrida never found herself outside the realm of God’s tender mercy – she eventually became a Benedictine Abbess and was regarded as a saint within her lifetime. The girl she had borne to Edgar would go on to become Saint Edith of Wilton.

Several religious congregations discarded their traditional clothing in the wake of the second Vatican council, often amid concerns of elitism and clericalism. Perhaps a more appropriate answer would have been to reconsider what the habit and veil actually symbolise: the redemptive covering of Christ, the pursuit of a Lover who simply never gives up.

Foundations

*An Essay from a member
of the Urban Abbey
Foundation Year*

Daniel Masters

Despair and Gilgamesh

Initially, when reading the Epic of Gilgamesh, one cannot but be struck by the universality of the human condition. Questions which troubled the Babylonian man, four-thousand years ago, still trouble modern man to this day: questions of life and death, loss and sorrow, love and friendship, adventure and peace etc. In the Epic, the dilemma of the human condition, from which our questions come, is put as a simple observation of the world around us: man is stuck in some kind of middle world of being: he is an animal, but also something apart from the animals, for he has the ability to reason his experiences towards their greatest potential, the eternal or perfection - the divine; but

while he has a sense of perfection, he is distant from it, he cannot attain to it. He is stuck between the two, between the contentment of the beasts, who have no worry for anything greater, and the contentment of the divine, where there is nothing more for which to worry. His situation, between the animals and the divine, is either one of lowering himself to a lesser state, or to ceaseless, restless yearning towards an unattainable end. The latter course is the course of philosophy, where discontentment and despair spurs us forward to question, search for answers, and write works like the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Epic follows, in particular, the universal story of pilgrimage. In Gilgamesh we find a story which is echoed to this day in film, art, tonal music, stories, and autobiographies, and we consider its archetype to be the prodigal son. Gilgamesh, likewise, begins in immaturity: he is a brash, tyrannical King with a naive and youthful desire for adventure. Like a teenager who leaves home for the first time he is suddenly confronted with harsher realities, most especially the death of his dearest friend Enkidu. This is the provoking of despair at the stark reality of the human condition. He thus, like a morose late 20-year-old, wanders the wild in search of a man called Uta-Napishti the Distant, the only man to gain immortality, to have been raised beyond the human condition, in the hope that he will answer his questions of despair. This wilderness is Gilgamesh's longing for more in a barren world, it is his despair, his wanting of a perfection that is distant. On his journey he is asked again and again why he is so sullen, wretched and wasted, "[why] in your heart [does sorrow

reside,]/ And your face resemble one [come from afar?]" His reply is powerful enough to simply quote and leave with you:

*'Why should my cheeks not be hollow, my face not sunken,
[my mood not wretched, my visage not wasted?]*

*'[my friend, a wild ass on the run,
[donkey of the uplands, panther of the wild,
[my friend Enkidu, a wild ass on the run,
[donkey of the uplands, panther of the wild,]*

*'[my friend, whom I loved so dear,
[who with me went through every danger,
[my friend Enkidu, whom I loved so dear,
[who with me went through every danger:]*

*'How can I keep silent?] How can I stay quiet?
[My friend, whom I loved, has turned] to clay,
My friend Enkidu, whom I loved, has [turned to clay.]
[Shall I not be like] him, and also lie down,
[never] to rise again, through all eternity?'*

Of course, the prodigal story, at a point, loses its universality, and where the prodigal Gilgamesh's pilgrimage and the Judeo-Christian' pilgrimage depart is in the ending. For what is the conclusion of Gilgamesh' despair? This is the part where we lean in with eager anticipation. Finding at last Uta-Napishti the Distant, Gilgamesh finally asks his question: "How did you find the life eternal?" The answer is unsatisfactory; it is not to say that it is not worth reading, nor that it is not useful to us, but rather it is not that for which we hoped, it does not satisfy our yearning. Uta-Napishti chastises Gilgamesh for

wasting his life with sorrow and toil, in search of something he can never attain: “both death and life they [the gods] have

established,/ But the day of Death they do not disclose.” In other words, man must simply resign himself to fate, to the human condition, to what he observes of the world, he is to be stuck between beasts and the gods: no matter how much he wants, he will never attain to perfection; and so as long as he does want, he will despair.

Therefore, Uta-Napishti asks: why

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despair at that which you cannot change? why chase a cheetah in the wild? Go home, enjoy life and forget its despairs. There is no sense of the Christian ending: hope.