

Mass at the Venerable English College, Rome

Homily: Mt Rev Patrick Kelly, Archbishop of Liverpool

Visit 'ad limina apostolorum'

1 February 2010

Friday Week 3, 2010

Introduction:

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptised with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished." (Lk 12.49-50, cf Lk 13.31-32, Jn. 19.30)

It is against the backdrop of God who did not spare his own Son (Rom 8.32), the Son over whom at his baptism into the floods of sinners and sin, the Spirit hovers (Mk 1.9-11): and of the Son from whose wounds fire shines to touch the broken earth; against that backdrop we receive the harsh accounts of adultery and murder and the Miserere. It will open up for us the loving wisdom, wisest love, generous love accomplished by the Lord.

Homily

To every priest; and everyone open to formation for ordination, the martyrs' picture insists: priest and victim. I am grateful that in my own years of formation priest and victim were spoken in one breath. It is a cause of great harm that the word victim tended to disappear, especially in debates about who may be called to ordination: words such as right, power, set apart, do not sit easily with the Lamb of God slain; the fulfilment, the accomplishment of Isaiah's suffering servant songs (Jn 1.29-34; Rev 5.6)

They do not sit comfortably with the baptism of the Lord beyond the Jordan (Jn 10.40-42) and on Calvary. His baptism by John was both the call and response not to remain aloof, safe, on the bank: just reaching out a hand, speaking a word of powerful command to sinners. True to the word spoken in the lowliness, poverty, poorest of the poor, feeble resources of his Mother Mary of Nazareth (Jn.1.46; Lk 1.26-27; Lk 1.46-55), true to the signs surrounding his birth, no room, shepherds as first visitors, a gift of myrrh (Lk 2.7; 2.8-20; Mt 2.11): the Lord, compassionate because without sin, insists: plunge me into the darkness, chaos, confusion, alienation, helplessness of sinners (Mt 3.13-17).

It's going to be the way of:

O generous love, that he who smote

In man, for man, the foe,

The double agony in man

For man should undergo

And that is why it is true to the word, the revelation that this event is, to appreciate his baptism as the form, the pattern, of our ordination: called, as we are, not many of us wise according to worldly standards, not many of powerful birth, but foolish, weak, lowly (1 Cor 1.26-31): but open to be renewed every day by growth in holiness: and by growth in holiness (Eph 3.14-21), the selflessness that is the opposite of self-centred, hard hearted sin, ever more able through and with and in him not to stand aloof, at a safe distance, holding out a repelling powerful hand, or sounding a summons that terrifies and cannot invite. Instead, ever more enabled by the Holy Spirit, in understanding, imagination, in silence, to make the sinner's, the world's hells our own (II Cor 5.21) and so in compassion accompany home. Following the example of him who went to every far country into which every erring son, daughter has gone, to live among swine (Lk 15.13) and walk alongside them home, making every fear, feeling, emotion our own.

The martyrs' picture invites us to be formed into a Holy Saturday way, priest and victim. He, because he is love descended into hell: he prayed Psalm 50 in the name of, and within the heart of every David; he prays De Profundis from within us. And from that love, tested, tried, broken, from that same source flow words about a body given up, about blood poured out for the forgiveness of sin. It is from his pierced side, his broken heart, his nail-shaped hands and feet, that the promise is accomplished: "He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (cf Jn 7.37-39; Jn 19.31-37; Rev 22. 1-2; Lk 3.16).

Only in the last hour did I know that the Antiphon composed by St Thomas Aquinas "O sacrum convivium" is to be sung this evening. Like all his hymns about the "Great Sacrament – Tantum Sacramentum" the cross forms the prayer. O Sacred Banquet in which Christ is received - recolitur memoria passionis eius – the memory of his passion is gathered together - mens impletur gratia – our innermost being is filled with the life of Jesus freely given to us – et future gloriae nobis pignus datur – and the foretaste of future glory is given to us: but in front of the Martyr's picture we recognise: that portrays glory: in the words of Fr Mollat in his lectures here to us 50 years ago: "Jesus crucifixus est Jesus glorificatus" – Jesus crucified is Jesus glorified (Jn 1.14; 2.4 and 11; 8.28; 12.32f). The life of the world to come is not where selflessness and self-sacrifice are over, but where any temptation to be self-centred is over.

From a pierced heart: 60 years ago Karl Rahner described the Priest as the man of the pierced heart. That is our identity.

It is the way of growth, "how, he does not know"; It is the way of the mustard seed (Mk 4.26-32). But slowly the conviction grows:

Praise to the holiest in the height

And in the depth be praise

In all his words most wonderful

Most sure in all his ways.

To re-visit, re-visit all this we may ponder Wednesday's second reading at the Office of Readings from St Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs.