

GOING TO MASS WITH MARMION

SERMON 1: THE BEGINNING AND THE END

During Lent I am going to preach five little sermons to you about the mysteries of the Mass. In particular, about the mysteries of the Mass as seen through the lens of one of these islands' greatest gifts to the world-wide church in the twentieth century, Dom Columba Marmion. Born in Dublin in 1858, he worked as a diocesan priest back before entering the Benedictine Community at Maredsous in Belgium. He was elected abbot and was in great demand as a spiritual guide and preacher of retreats, not least here in our own diocese at Erdington Abbey in Birmingham. His writings became hugely influential, particularly after his early death in 1923. If you have tripped over my spiritual reading, messily left lying about perhaps after Holy Hour on a Friday morning, you will have seen some of his books. I often have one to hand. Many are easily available in modern editions and translations from the French. Pope St John Paul II beatified him in 2000.

I could say so much more which time does not allow. But that is partly the point. Because like all the saints, Marmion would be aghast at the thought of a sermon about him. All the glory, all the attention must go to God – and this is where we are going to start in our fleeting encounter with his teachings about the mysteries of the Mass.

Now there can be a temptation, quite understandable given the sort of social creatures we are, to think over-much in *social and community* terms of the Mass. It is equally understandable that, being the people we are with emotions, joys and sorrows, fears and thanksgivings, we can think first and foremost of how the Mass makes us *feel*. And of course there is *something* important in this. But it is not the *starting point* for our encounter with God here and at every altar, Sunday after Sunday, day after day, in the Mass. The starting point must always be Christ himself and not just the Christ of the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday but also the Christ of Good Friday on Golgotha, the Christ of Easter morning and the Empty Tomb and the Christ of Ascension Day returning to his Heavenly Father's side.

Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father in eternal splendour. But, as Wesley's great Advent hymn reminds us, "Those dear tokens of his Passion / Still his dazzling body bears." To understand the sacerdotal life of Christ in Heaven we must distinguish, according to St Thomas Aquinas, between the offering of the one sacrifice and its consummation. The sacrifice which redeems us has been accomplished but remains to communicate its fruits to those of us who are caught up in it, those of us who astonishingly are called to assist in it. "Pray brethren, that this my sacrifice and yours ..."

Marmion makes great use of the letter to the Hebrews. There we are reminded that the Old Testament high priest, one man who entered the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple only once a year was a foreshadowing of Christ. He wore on his heart 12 precious stones symbolising the twelve tribes – and so the whole Chosen

People entered with him mystically into the sanctuary. If that was the prefiguring, how much more noble was the priestly act of Christ. The old high priests did not, could not, gain access for the people within the Temple veil but Christ our high priest leads us after him into heaven. We cannot enter except through him. No human being can enjoy the beatific vision except after and by the power of Jesus. This is the triumphant reward of his sacrifice.

To turn on in the pages of Scripture, St John in the final book takes up the theme of the worship of the company of Heaven and repeats it time and time again. In the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Lamb – the sacrificial title for Christ used by St John the Baptist in words we hear at every Mass – is the celestial light. It is only the graces springing from the sacrifice of Jesus which have gained for the redeemed access to the Father and have given them the power to praise him.

Thus it is that the Scriptures assure us that a majestic liturgy is celebrated in Heaven. Christ offers Himself in all his splendour and this oblation is the completion and the consummation of redemption. In this heavenly worship we will be united to Jesus and to each other; our eternal privilege will be to take part in the adoration, the love and the thanksgiving which all creation sends up to the Holy Trinity.

And this, nothing less, is our point of reference whenever we “do this in memory of me.” Not just the Upper Room one specific night 2000 years ago in Jerusalem but in the Kingdom of Heaven for all eternity where life is endless praise. For all eternity it will be our joy to realise that our blessings come from Jesus, that his priesthood is the source of all the graces which we receive here in this earthly pilgrimage.

So this is our starting point. And when the Church celebrates the worship of which she is the custodian she must never forget it. This is not without practical significance for Church architecture and liturgy. Churches traditionally point East towards the rising sun, the most primeval symbol of the Resurrection. The traditional format of a Church in this country invites priest and people to gaze together in the same direction towards the crucified and risen Lord. The celebrant, if you like, is the arrow-head for the prayers of the whole community who – to run with that image – might be seen in the shaft and the flight feathers of the same arrow, united in common purpose, flying in one direction.

Time presses on. In the next four weeks we will ask Marmion to help us explore four facets of the divine mysteries. For now our first meditation this Lent from Blessed Columbia is this:

When we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, we must believe that we enter into this magnificent torrent of praise, that we participate in the liturgy of Heaven. ... As we await the vision and the full clarity of the city of God let it be our joy to repeat, “O Jesus ... for us be everything while we march on in the spirit of faith towards the eternal Jerusalem.” (Christ - the Ideal of the Priest, p.36.)