

GOING TO MASS WITH MARMION

II: THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

Recapitulation: Last week we started our little Lenten course of sermons on the mysteries of the Mass as seen through the lens of the great twentieth century Benedictine, Blessed Columba Marmion. Last week we looked with Marmion at the starting point and the end of all our worship: nothing earthly but nothing less than the endless worship of Heaven to which our gaze must always be turned here at Mass. Today in the second sermon we look at the first main section of the Mass, the part in which we are involved even now, the Liturgy of the Word – the section of the Mass where we encounter God in the words of our four readings from Holy Scripture. (How easy it is to forget that the psalm is also a reading from Scripture. Jesus would have known those words off by heart and used them every week of his life in the synagogue.)

Principles: Marmion finds a wonderful image: “Holy Scripture, carefully read and even learned by heart will always be like a living fountain in the heart.” Learning things by heart is something which has gone out of fashion in schools even in my teaching career of 34 years. But it is an important part of that command to “read, mark learn and inwardly digest” Holy Scripture. “A living fountain.” It is not like a tap which we can turn on or off with varying degrees of difficulty to stop it dripping. A living fountain bubbles up and over in overflowing generosity.

Now the two main parts of the Mass are essential to each other. They go together in many ways and yet they enshrine a variety of approaches. Not so much our approaches to God (although there is something in that) but much more importantly God’s approach to us. Marmion finds an image which has stayed with me: “In the Eucharist the divine Word hides himself under the Sacred species, clothed in sacred silence; in the Scriptures he communicates himself to us under the form of human speech, according to the manner of our expression.” Where the Blessed Sacrament waits silently for us and with us in the Tabernacle, Christ in the Scriptures is positively noisy: he shouts from the rooftops in the way which he has given us to communicate with each other, namely speech. And we must remember that “Proclamation” in a community is a very different thing from quiet reading in an armchair.

The Trinity: As Marmion started and ended last week by putting the Mass into the context of the life of the Trinity, so too the Liturgy of the Word is inextricably bound up with the inner life of the Holy Trinity. “The Word of God is incomprehensible. In the Son the Father gives expression to all that he is and all that he knows. In the Scriptures we read one syllable of that incommunicable Word. In Heaven we shall contemplate the living Word; here on earth ... a portion of divine wisdom has been made known by the holy Writings.”

Perhaps the Gospel reading from Caesarea Philippi which the Church gave us at Mass last Monday is helpful here. “Who do people say that I am?” ask Jesus of the apostles. They fail to meet his gaze. They shuffled their feet. They tried to dodge the question. “Well, some people say you are John the Baptist, or one of the prophets ...” Jesus will not let them off. “But YOU, who do YOU say that I am?” And it is Peter, of course, who dives in and gives the right answer, “You are the Christ.” During the life of Jesus Christ there were many who

saw only the externals; they did not suspect that under the appearances of man was also divinity; for them the Word Incarnate remained hidden even when he stood in front of them. Likewise, there are some throughout history which have not gone beyond the human element in the Scriptures and fail to discover the divine revelation which is enshrined. Yes, in one sense, these are interesting historical documents from between 2000 and 3000 years ago, but that is perhaps the least interesting thing about them. As the Coronation Service puts it as the monarch is presented with a Bible, "This is the most valuable thing this world affords; these are the lively oracles of God." The approach of faith is in no way prejudicial to critical study; but in our studies we need to remind ourselves that here in contain the eternal words, the message of God Himself.

Preaching: Liturgy of the Word also includes the homily and this is the part of this sermon which must strike fear into the heart of anyone who has ever been ordained to stand up and preach. "Part of the duty of a priest [or deacon or bishop to open the minds of God's faithful to an understanding of the great and fruitful truths of revelation. Through Jesus the thoughts of the eternal wisdom are made intelligible to our minds; they have been transmitted to the world through the Sacred Scriptures and through Sacred Tradition. Like the seed of the sower, these words are bearers of life. When the priest proclaims these truths, must not speak as a private individual. He is an ambassador speaking in the name of the Master."

Preaching is described by St Paul like this: "Preach the word. Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine." Preaching is an order. It must rely on doctrinal groundwork; it must enlighten the mind and touch the heart of the hearer. "A solid theological formation is essential if we are to expose the revealed truths of our faith in language which is in harmony with the spirit of the Church."

Practical considerations: Of course, all of this has implications for how the Church organises her divine worship. The first thing to say is that despite all the good things which desk-top publishing and photocopiers (when those capricious things choose to work) have brought us, Scripture is to be *proclaimed* in Church, not read off the page. We should keep our heads up. I am a huge believer in singing the Gospel and Epistle to those ancient chants which take us back to the Church's early years, if not indeed the synagogue. Here is "reading" unlike any other. Those of us who were at the Papal Mass of Canonisation for St John Henry Newman will never forget the spine-tingling moment when the Greek Deacon being blessed by Pope Francis and then breaking out with the Gospel – in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's original written language – which rolled around St Peter's Square to the ancient Byzantine chant in a glorious bass voice.

The Gospel Book is carried with the greatest honour in procession. It is enthroned on the altar. When we are back to normal after lockdown there will be candles and incense. I have always been struck by the contrast between this great solemnity and then the perfunctory way in which it is put to one side. But that is the point. Once the Gospel is proclaimed, its work is done for now. Its message is, or should be, now in our minds, lips and hearts – as the crossings of ourselves remind us. It has never been easier to prepare the Scriptures at home. As well as missals and publications such as the Magnificat booklet there are websites such as www.universalis.com which provide all that we might need online to prepare ourselves

prayerfully for the morrow. And mentioning Scripture and prayers bring us back to the fact that Marmion was a Benedictine for whom every day the seven-fold office and two daily Masses (one his own Mass, one the conventual Mass of the community) were supplemented by *Lectio Divina* – quiet, meditative, holy reading.

Conclusion: Addressing young Benedictine novices, Marmion said, “Our Holy Father Benedict knew by experience that no source of contemplation is purer and more fruitful than the Holy Scriptures. ... ‘Would you enter into the very heart of God?’ asks St Gregory. ‘Listen to his words.’ With a being as essentially true as God, his words manifest his nature. Have we not here the very mystery of the eternal essence?”

“We find Jesus’ words in the Gospel, first of all. There we listen to Jesus himself, the Word Incarnate ... To the Gospels are added the letters of the Apostles. St John and St Paul both repeat to us the divine words into the meaning of which they had penetrated ... And as Jesus Christ was yesterday as he is today and will be tomorrow, the Old Testament itself reveals him to us.

“The whole treasury of the Scriptures reveals Christ to us; on each page we read his name; they unveil the unfathomable riches of the mystery of his life and sufferings, they recount to us the supreme triumphs of his glory.” (*Christ, the Ideal of the Monk* p.362ff.)