

GOING TO MASS WITH MARMION

SERMON III: THE SACRIFICE

We spent our first week looking with Blessed Columba Marmion at the origin and the goal of all our worship which is nothing other than the unending worship of Heaven. Thanks to Fr Antony's vision and the generosity of various friends we have edited highlights from the best example in Christian art I know of the worship of Heaven here in the sanctuary: Van Eyk's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. When the lockdown is over I suggest you get on the Eurostar and make a trip to Ghent in Belgium to see the real thing. It is astonishing. But we also have the same picture in the stained glass window above the altar thanks to the Bellasis family. You can see the angels with their censers, you can see the saints – St Michael with his flaming sword – but where is Jesus? The answer, of course, is that Jesus is here at Mass and the sightlines converge at the point where the priest elevates the Sacred Host. The worship of earth caught up in the worship of Heaven. Our second week looked at the Liturgy of the Word and Jesus coming to us in the inspired Scriptures. And now we come to the Liturgy of the Sacrifice. Catholics use the phrase “the Sacrifice of the Mass” so frequently and yet we so seldom stop to think about the many facets of the word. Marmion has much to say about them all.

In the first place, what we are about at Mass is nothing less than a *propitiatory sacrifice* – a sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world. Truly we offer the Sacrifice of Calvary here and now. For Marmion, “The Eucharistic sacrifice is the continuation of the sacrifice of the Cross. Every time we celebrate the divine mysteries we announce the death of the Lord.”

Now we can struggle when we try to explain to ourselves how what we do at 10am on the morning of 7 March 2021, let us say, is caught up in the events of a Friday afternoon in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago. But we do well to remember Marmion's words, “For God there is no past and no future. He possesses in an unchangeable present the whole infinity of his life of knowledge, and of love and of beatitude. For us there is always a succession of time, existence is meted out to us instant by instant. That is why it is measured by time. But God, in his eternity, embraces in one glance the succession of events which constitute for us the past the present and the future.” And so it is that, “At the consecration, the whole drama of Calvary, with all the consequence of sufferings and humiliations which is involved for Jesus, is present before God.”

Marmion made good use of a striking image drawn from the Old Testament with the facility of a Benedictine for whom Sacred Reading was a daily form of meditation. “After plotting Joseph's destruction and selling him to strangers, his brothers soaked his cloak in blood and sent it to Jacob as a sign of the death of his son. Every time we celebrate Mass, the priest is not displaying the garment of Jesus as a proof of his Passion in the past, he is presenting the Son himself under the sacred species, making immolation in sacramental form.” And if the altars of our churches are truly the place of sacrifice, so too the sacrifice is here. “On the altar stone at each and every Mass the Father sees the body and blood of the Son of his love. And the Son places before the eyes of the Father his love, obedience, suffering, an oblation of his whole life. And, of course, the Father casts on us all a look of mercy.”

For many people the important things of this world are financial or political. This is not to say that Christians should not be concerned with financial justice or political integrity. But to the eyes of faith the Mass belongs to a higher order of values. It is the Mass which on earth gives the fullest glory to God. Whether we are at a glorious liturgy in a great cathedral or shrine like Lourdes, part of a congregation of thousands, sometimes millions, or two or three gathered in a little country church on a dark winter morning, there is nothing greater on earth, nothing greater in creation, that men and women can do. "Nothing less than this is happening: we are honouring the sovereign Lord and render him propitious to the miseries of the whole world."

So if this is our first use of the word "sacrifice," we also speak of the sacrifice of thanks and praise. The worship the Mass is the worship of pure praise rendered to God for his own sake. We reply to the *Orate fratres* "... may the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, to the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy church." Look at the order. The praise and glory of his name comes first. Our personal advantage, and that of the whole Church, though very real and very important, take second place.

In heaven the liturgy will strike no note other than those of praise, love and joy. Expiation for sin and petitionary prayer for all our worries and needs, as such, will no longer exist. As we saw in our first week, Marmion appeals to St John's vision of the worship of heaven: the immolated Lamb, standing before the throne of God. Every Mass celebrated here on earth is united to the liturgy in Heaven. In the silence of the Host, the Son of God, the Word, renders to his Father boundless glory. And our cry is the cry of Heaven: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Our first duty at Mass is not only to unite ourselves with the choirs of angels but even more astonishingly to unite ourselves to the praise offered by Jesus in his sacred humanity. We unite ourselves to the praise offered by Jesus. "Faith our outward sense befriending, Makes the inward vision clear" we sing at Benediction – or we will do when singing is allowed again. Some saints, like St Philip Neri, had so lively a faith that it penetrated the mystery and enabled them to grasp the reality.

On a practical level certain things can help us remember this: silence is one. It has an important place in our prayers, not least in an ever more noisy world. If our telephone does not ring in the course of a morning we assume it is broken. If we have not had a deluge of emails, most of which need no response, by lunchtime, we assume there is a problem with the server. Silence is an essential part of our prayers and it is an essential part of the life of any parish church. The greatest church architect of the twentieth century in my eyes, Sir Ninian Comper, wrote a magisterial essay called *Of the Atmosphere of a Church*. For Comper the architect, a church building existed for the principal reason of housing an altar. "Atmosphere" has many meanings but we know instinctively what Comper means and we know it when we encounter that holy stillness in a church, great or small. Another practical consideration can be bodily posture. Standing and kneeling have their place, not least before the altar. It is so good that both our churches here have retained our Communion rails. Go to the Pope's Mass in Rome and you will see a kneeling desk for Communion. Kneeling for Holy Communion does not have to be restricted to the old Latin Mass and has its place for many. And then, in

my experience, children tend to be pretty good at picking up atmosphere of somewhere special if the adults make that atmosphere obvious..

So the Mass is a sacrifice to take sins away, it is a sacrifice of pure praise and it is a sacrifice of thanksgiving – the simple meaning of the Greek word “Eucharist.” Noble souls know the need to testify to their gratitude. St Therese of Lisieux, for example, had a heart which was on the point of bursting with her thirst for thanksgiving. St Gertrude, similarly, has a remarkable passage where rather than offering up a general confession for all the sins of her past life, she offered up to the Trinity all the favours which had been lavished upon her since childhood. The whole of her writings is in fact one great canticle of grateful praise.

Jesus thanked the Father on our behalf and as our brother and example. At the miracle of feeding the crowds with loaves and fishes, and at the Last Supper, he explicitly gave thanks. Here we have a glimpse of the interior life of his soul and it is a moment reproduced at every Mass just before the words of institution as the priest’s eyes gaze Heaven-ward.

And as for us, we owe everything to God. As we hear in the preface of every Mass, “always and everywhere to give thanks...” We have so much for which we must give thanks. “Thank you” Those two little words which are so essential and yet so curiously easy to forget to say. At Mass we have the best possible expression for our gratitude to God, for the glories of Jesus and for the graces afforded to his mother and to all the saints, to the Church and to ourselves.