

Sermon Notes for Circumcision

“not peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10.34)

This is the octave day of Christmass. So it is natural that we should still focus on the gospel for the Nativity – the beginning of St. John. It is programmatic for his gospel as a whole – and for the three epistles as well. The circumcision is not for him an important truth; he assumed it was done.

Is it good news? Obviously there is good news in it, that a possibility is now open. God does not change his mind; he always intended to open it, and, by a way unknown to us, nobody who should benefit from it will fail to do so, whether they lived too soon or in unavoidable ignorance. Anyway, that is not our problem. It is open. “As many as received him, to them gave he the power to become Sons of God.” That is what we open ourselves to, however incompletely and feebly, every time we worship here. We do not know whether we will persist, whether we will ultimately prove to have been “born of God”. But the possibility is open, at least until death. Some good news, then.

But what of the others? St. John's description of the situation is very bleak. “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not”. I think we should understand by “the world” the generality of people. True, there are exceptions. Broadly, in John, the less Jewish (whether Galilean, Samaritan, or Greek), the better the possibility of some positive response. But “he came unto his own, and his own received him not”. What John understands as “the Jews” (being one himself, but he means the system fast emerging by the end of the first century which was to become orthodox Judaism) rejected the coming of the Word of God into his own created order.

So incarnation leads to division. I suspect St. John knew that Christians were and would remain a minority, and this did not worry him. But clearly it has worried much of the Church much of the time; hence the chase for numbers.

Division is indeed a fundamental truth. Ironically, the much-neglected feasts after Christmass Day exemplify it. Stephen is martyred as a conscious rejection of the Christian proclamation. John, as we have seen, teaches division as fact (which does not mean as a good). The Innocents are victims to Herod's determination to have no rival king. Becket is victim to a lesser Herod, indeed, but still one determined to have religion on his terms, not God's. There are many who, faced with light, prefer darkness. This is the savage analysis with which that overworked passage “God so loved the world” (John 3) concludes. Is this only the invention of the gospel writers? Check Luke 12.51: “think ye that I am come to give peace in the earth? Nay, but rather division.”

But division is inconvenient to “Leviathan”. So the state would rather have a unifying religion. Unfortunately, the Church has tended to collaborate ever since Constantine. If there is to be a state religion, then it would be for all and binding on all. But that is very alien from what we have seen in the New Testament. Henry VIII imagined he had achieved the proper form of state religion as outlined in parts of the Old Testament (he was head of the the Church as well as the state), but even if he had, the state religion has since sunk from “all” to barely two percent of the population. We have to ask whether God ever wanted this “godly kingdom”. In our sad history, he has rejected it.

Augustine's “two cities” is a model much closer to the gospel. God has indeed something to do with the city of man, but that can never become the city of God. Difference of purpose and even conflict are inevitable. We Christians have to see this. Indeed, the city of man (whose beginning is Babel) is precisely that fantasy of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps which is the ultimate rejection of the Incarnation. Christ came, and we at least welcome him, because salvation is God's purpose and gift, not man's effort and achievement. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name, which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” Our hope is only in humility.

“Christ is the light, let us receive the light. Christ is the truth, let us believe the truth. Christ is the way, let us follow the way. And because he is our only master, our only teacher, our only shepherd, and chief captain; therefore let us become his servants, his scholars, his sheep, and his soldiers. Let us receive Christ, not for a time, but for ever; let us believe his word, not for a time, but for ever; let us become his servants, not for a time, but for ever; in consideration that he hath redeemed and saved us, not for a time, but for ever; and will receive us into his heavenly kingdom, there to reign with him, not for a time, but for ever.” (*conclusion of the Homily on the Nativity*)