



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Christ in the Old Testament

Advent Course 2018 - St Mary's Parish Centre, Bodmin

When Mick Corcoran, chairman of our Evangelisation Group, first suggested we do this course for Advent this year I was delighted on two grounds. First of all because it demonstrated a desire to know more of the Book of the Church, the Holy Scripture. Second because it demonstrated a mature and sophisticated understanding of the extraordinary reality that lies at the heart of our Faith.

To the other great monotheistic religions, our elder brothers in faith, the Jews, and the later grouping, the followers of Mohammed (who offer a misguided corrective to both Judaism and Christianity), the Christian Faith is a puzzle. We say we believe in One God but we speak of Trinity and, in their eyes, centre our comprehension of this One God on the physical human life of an obscure first century rabbi and the Pauline interpretations that turned His life and teaching into the most successful universal cult in history.

How do we square the circle? How can the one true eternal God be 'confused' with a human being living in time and late in history?

THE PRE-EXISTENT WORD

I want to begin with a second century AD document rejoicing in the title of the Apologia of Justin Martyr to Trypho.

Justin and Trypho met in Ephesus. Justin newly converted from pagan philosophy to Christianity. Trypho – a practising Jew. The ground covered in the debate is immense but there is one central pastoral question that hovers at the heart of it all. If Jesus is the Christ then, coming as He did 'late in time', what happens to all the 'faithful' who could never have known Him. Put bluntly, Trypho's question is what is the eternal fate of my granny and grandpa?

Justin doesn't miss a beat here:

'I said also, that those who regulated their lives by the law of Moses would in like manner be saved. For what in the law of Moses is naturally good, and pious, and righteous, and has been prescribed to be done by those who obey it; and what was appointed to be performed by reason of the hardness of the people's hearts; was similarly recorded and done also by those who were under the law. Since those who did that which is universally, naturally, and eternally good are pleasing to God, they shall be saved through this Christ in the resurrection equally with those righteous men who were before them, namely Noah, and Enoch, and Jacob, and whoever else there be, along with those who have known this Christ, Son of God, who was before the morning star and the moon, and submitted to become incarnate, and be born of this virgin of the family of David, in order that, by this dispensation, the serpent that sinned from the beginning, and the angels like him, may be destroyed, and that death may be contemned, and for ever quit, at the second coming of the Christ Himself, those who believe in Him and live acceptably,--and be no more: when some are sent to be punished unceasingly into judgment and condemnation of fire; but others shall exist in freedom from suffering, from corruption, and from grief, and in immortality."

The chapter is headed:

CHAPTER XLV -- THOSE WHO WERE RIGHTEOUS BEFORE AND UNDER THE LAW SHALL BE SAVED BY CHRIST.

The importance of this declaration by one of the early fathers is simply further evidence of the nature of Christ. Those who, before His coming in the flesh, responded to Him as the Word of God will be saved. The great saints of the Old Testament will be in Heaven because they responded to the Word.

The significance of the Word is the key to our understanding of Christ and to our response to the Incarnation of Christ in Jesus.

THE BOOK OF THE GENESIS:

Let us begin at the beginning:

The Torah, the five books of the Jewish Law open, appropriately, with the Book of the Genesis. This is not a tome of natural science but a portrait in human language of our origins and ends, comprehensible by all generations who have ever read it. It begins with the narrative of Creation. We are introduced to God who creates – the word used here is unique to the divine project. Man makes from what is – God *creates ex nihilo* (out of nothing). As we listen to this simple but stupendous account, we are introduced to the Spirit of God who broods over the chaos (or formless void) and we hear the voice of God utter the divine ‘fiat’ – let there be light. The Word, which brings everything into being, is spoken. This plurality (Father/Creator, Word and Spirit) in the unity is later underwritten by God’s declaration, at the summit of creation, ‘Let us make Man in our own image.’ The word for the one God is a plural word and in the very opening of Holy Scripture we see a picture of the Trinity.

It is this theme that is picked up in the great Christmas Gospel of St. John. (Indeed, the more ancient among you will remember every Mass closing with a recitation of this Gospel.) Let me reprise it for you:

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.’

This dynamic and creative power of God is the Second Person of the Trinity. In the Creed we refer to this as follows:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, True God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS WERE MADE

This is the Word of divine power and presence – the secret at the heart of the universe, the mystery at the centre of all that is.

We then declare, echoing St. John,

‘For us men and for our salvation, He came down from Heaven and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became Man’

‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’.

No wonder we bow. In the old days we knelt. If we could we should prostrate ourselves at such a miracle of transcendent condescension – of such immensity of the grace and gift of God.

When we begin to comprehend the edges of this amazing mystery, we are able to begin to understand the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament. We do not have to look for odd traces of the divine. The Word, which will become flesh/incarnate in Jesus, is ubiquitous. It is everywhere. The history of salvation is shot through with the revelation of His Presence. Indeed, the very Scripture itself is the Divine Word.

With this as our background understanding we begin to see the reality of the Presence of Christ in the Old Testament in a whole new light.

From this realisation we move on to being able to see Him in the archetypes and prototypes in which the history of salvation abounds.

FALL AND REDEMPTION

But before we even get to the history of redemption we are faced with the tragedy of the Fall of Man – or what the great Easter Hymn, the Exultet, calls ‘the happy fault, o necessary sin of Adam that won for us so great a Redeemer’. In creating Man, God has created a being in imago Dei, in His own image. Furthermore, He has created in both Adam, the spirit breathed dust, and Eve, the mother of all living, a perfect sinless couple. This will not happen again until the Immaculacy of Mary and the birth of the sinless Saviour, Jesus, the Christ. In Adam then is anticipated Christ. The Christ will come as the second Adam to restore God’s original intention for Man, that is to dwell in the Paradise of God in the Eternal Presence.

In Eve, who by sin will become the mother not of the living but, after the Fall, of the dying, is anticipated the gift of Our Lady who, by obedience and grace, will become the way in which, through her Son, the dying can be restored to eternal life.

Where the gates of Eden are closed on the exiled sinners and defended by the whirling flaming sword of the Cherubim, the new portal is opened by Our Lady’s assent to the divine Word- brought by the supreme angelic messenger of God at the Annunciation.

In the Garden, from which our original parents have been expelled there is the Tree of Life which they neglected in favour of disobedience and the knowledge of evil. In a much later garden the fruit of that tree, a tree now disguised as an instrument of torture and death, will rise from the dead and take our transformed and death defeating humanity into His eternal divinity.

THREE KEY ARCHETYPES

When we have drawn breath from this realisation, we move on to the next sign. You may often wonder, as we pray the Roman Canon in the

midst of the Mass why those particular three names are invoked as the priest offers the consecrated gifts, 'the Holy Bread of Life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation'. I refer, of course, to Abel the just, Abraham our father in faith and the High Priest, Melchizedek.

They are not here by accident. Abel is the younger son of Adam and Eve. He is a shepherd, a good one. He is murdered by his brother, Cain, out of jealousy for his superior offering to God. In Christian apologetic Abel has always been seen as a type of Christ. He represents the good shepherd and the perfect offering. Nothing is more likely to enrage sinful man. The seeds of persecution of the righteous are sown in the heart of fallen man. The inspiration for war – which is the murder of man by man, a fratricidal strife born of sin and division, anger and jealousy – is anticipated. The innocent are sacrificed. So Abel stands as a type of Christ-like sacrifice.

Then we move to Abraham. From the wreckage of human failure God starts again by choosing one man, 'and him as good as dead'. He promises him a son by his barren wife and that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars of Heaven. (No wonder they named the child 'laughter' - Isaac. That promise is fulfilled against all human odds and understanding. Then God makes a terrible demand. Sacrifice Isaac. Give me back the future. Give me back all your hope and trust and longing. Give me the point and purpose of your life. Give me everything. On Mount Moriah, three agonising days' journey on – three days that will mirror the frantic search for the lost Christ child in the Streets of Jerusalem, three days that will prefigure the period between the dereliction of Calvary and the rejoicing of the Emmaus Road - the Patriarch binds his son to the altar and raises the knife. The very future of the People of God hangs by a thread.

And God intervenes. He has tested Abraham's faith to the limit and gives him back his life and his child and his future.

(This is a terrible story for us to read but we need to bear in mind that child sacrifice was a commonplace in the pagan world, as indeed it is today in our own society. It has always been abhorrent to the Judeo-Christian world). What Abraham could not know was that, on this very spot where God would spare the son of man, Isaac, two millennia later Man would not spare the Son of God. The summit of Mount Moriah is the Hill of the Calvary. The substitutionary sacrifice for Isaac was a ram caught in a thicket. The substitutionary sacrifice for you and me and all mankind is the Lamb of God.

These are the early moments of the history of salvation where archetypes abound and pointers to the future are frequently found. This could not be any clearer than in the last of these Genesis references in the Canon of the Mass. We encounter, in three short verses an extraordinary and enigmatic character named Melchizedek. He greets Abraham in the day of his success in battle against the kings who had captured Lot and his family. We are told simply his name – which means 'King of Righteousness' and that he is King of Salem. This will become the holy city Jerusalem. It also means that he is the King of Peace. In addition we are told that Melchizedek is the priest of the Most High God. In an age of striking multiplicities of pagan deities this is, of itself, an extraordinary claim and indicator. And there is more. Traditionally priests sacrificed with the slaughter of beasts – blood, the life being propitiatory. Melchizedek, we are told, brings.... wait for it....bread and wine. Who else do we know whose sacrifice and triumph is celebrated thus? He pronounces the blessing on Abraham, in the name of God, confirming the original divine blessing and, in response, Abraham tithes his goods to Melchizedek – something that you only do to God and his

priests. Prophet, priest and king, blessing of the people of God, priest of the Most High God, King of Righteousness, King of Peace, King of the Holy City Jerusalem whose triumph and sacrifice is celebrated in bread and wine.

Wow.

Here, in the account of the Genesis and represented in the Canon of the Mass are the great archetypes, the hints of what is and what is to come.

JACOB/ISRAEL AND JOSEPH

Beyond the pilgrim life of Abraham, the divine encounters under the star bejewelled night skies of the empty desert and the strange Trinitarian encounter with the Angels of the Presence before the Oaks of Mamre, the book of the Genesis devotes itself primarily to two highly significant characters. One is the controversial and conflicted heir of the promise, Jacob, who will become Israel. His moments come in two distinct geographical settings. Both occur when he is running for his life from his rightly aggrieved brother Esau. (Ch. 28 v 12)

On the outskirts of the town called Luz. (The word Luz refers to almond trees, but it also means a place of turning aside or separation.) Here the fugitive Jacob sleeps on a stone which he will later anoint as an altar. He dreams. He sees a ladder joining earth to Heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. It is to this vision that Jesus alludes when He meets Nathaniel. For Christ Himself is the ladder that joins Heaven and Earth. Jacob awakes to proclaim that the place of the turning aside is none other than Beth El, the House of God, the portal to the Eternal. Here is the vision of the reality of Christ the link between the altar and the Presence.

The second place is at the Ford of Jabbok (Ch.32 v 22) where the Jacob engages in a nocturnal wrestling match with a stranger who represents

the Presence of God. We know that Jacob was having a huge internal struggle, but this extraordinary passage clearly indicates a physical encounter with the Divine. The importance, indeed uniqueness, of this event is underlined by the fact that Jacob wrestles a blessing from this being and receives his new name, Israel – ‘who wrestles with God’. Jacob names that place Peniel – the face of God. Given the fact that ‘no-one can see the face of God and live’, this event is only equalled by a later encounter of Moses and the elders (of which more later) in which the Eucharist is anticipated.

We know that God has shown His face to us in Christ. Jacob, the original Israel of God, has been blessed out of time with this revelation.

The final part of the Genesis jigsaw is given us by the story of Joseph. This remarkable history occupies the final thirteen chapters of the fifty that comprise the Book of the Beginnings. It does so partly because it is foundational background to the great Exodus story which will forever define the saving act of God for His People but also because it resonates Christ.

Here is the beloved of the father, betrayed by his brothers, handed to the Gentiles and later imprisoned. He will rise, by the grace of God and his power to interpret dreams, to the highest position in the kingdom under Pharaoh. He will not only save the kingdom from death by his wisdom and planning but he will, in the fullness of time, save the sons of Jacob from death. These same brothers who betrayed him will be saved by God’s providence and Joseph’s forgiveness and mercy. When Joseph finally tells them who he is, he weeps but explains to them that God used their wickedness in their treatment of him as a means of salvation. The Gospel themes are obvious.

Joseph’s Egyptian name is Zaphenath – Paneah – meaning ‘Saviour of the World – provider of bread’ (Ch 41 v 45)

The parallels with the Christ event abound.

The sinful and now penitent brothers do not recognise him at first.

(Ch. 42 v 8)

Their silver is returned to his betrayers. (Ch. 42 v25)

They are three days in prison. (Ch42 v 17)

The chalice of the Saviour, in which the future is known, is found in the haversack of the beloved younger brother. (Ch.44)

And so it goes on. The story of Joseph is the foundational salvation history of the Old Covenant and it advertises Christ.

The three Josephs in Holy Scripture all have to do with salvation through Christ.

This Joseph as an archetype provider of the Bread which brings life to the dying

The husband of the Blessed Virgin as the guardian of the Body that will transform the Bread into the eternal sustenance.

Joseph of Arimathea who will attend and reverence The Body while the miracle of the three days is completed, and that Body will be revealed in the accidents of Bread and Wine and feed His faithful people until the end of time.

More next week.