

CHRISTMAS DAY 2019

ST. JOHN'S PROLOGUE

The Prologue to John's Gospel describes Jesus as "full of grace and truth"[...] "He dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). This is a compelling description of a person! The author of The Fourth Gospel had grown up a pious Jew trained in Jewish values. He already knew what grace and truth were. Grace was God's loving kindness shown to his people, and truth meant unyielding fidelity to promises and commitments.

Grace and Truth

These are ideals to be sought after; we regret that we cannot realize them, often not gracious in defeat for instance. A gracious person is a treasure, always good, patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting always on his or her own way, not irritable or resentful, not rejoicing at wrong, but always rejoicing in what is right, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things. So wrote St. Paul in 1 Cor 13. This vision of human excellence inspired the recently canonized saint John Henry Newman. He wrote: "The Apostles were gentlemen [...] not that they made a good bow, wore kid gloves, or spoke Attic Greek, but their minds and their hearts were refined. I have always maintained that St. Paul, as seen in his Epistles, was the first of gentlemen- and if you would look for the precepts of courtesy and grace, which the world so much admires, you must go to him for them" (LD.XII.p.159). This was entirely consonant with pursuing the ideals of Christianity. What Newman found in Paul was the ideal of human and divine virtues lived out every day as discipleship. Behind St. Paul, of course, was Jesus himself: for me to live is Christ (Phil 1:21). Saint Luke recounts St. Peter's words in his famous speech to the Gentile Cornelius, in the Acts of the Apostles: Jesus went about doing good (Acts 10:38). The whole world was thus given a very simple and accessible summary of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, with the invitation to follow him, and realize human potential to the full.

St. John's Gospel

'The Word made Flesh' is St. John's presentation of the Good News of Jesus in historical experience. This stimulates our concentration on this Christmas day on the aspect 'to be full of grace and truth'. Like the Word made flesh, in which heaven and earth meet in ordinary experience, we too are invited to live. We thank God when we meet the reality in another person. Think of the difference it makes when we go to see the doctor, or deal with those responsible for the post office, or the bank, or transport. When people have some grace of disposition, and sensitivity for the truth, it makes our life so much easier. As for believers, "The Church should be the shrine of all the decencies," Rose Macaulay wrote in *The Towers of Trebizond*. It should characterize the community in which people show respect and kindness and live the truth with affection.. On Christmas day most people make a big effort to be really kind and nice to everyone- and this is much easier of course if we try to do it all the time. But we are predisposed for it in the atmosphere of Christmas- not asking anything back, offering warm greetings for their own sake. The massive attention given these days to the sick and poor, to the homeless and migrants, to prisoners and those with broken lives, evidences this and encourages us. Human beings really are capable of, and often do show love and goodness. Their shadow side is less obvious at Christmas.

The Year of the Bible for Catholics

Our efforts in this respect can be much helped if we follow the encouragement of the Pope and Bishops to study the Bible this coming year. The Second Vatican Council (1962-5) urged all Catholics to know the Scriptures. The immense commitment of Christian scholarship to the Bible over the last two hundred years is bearing fruit daily in the life of the Church. The Council said repeatedly that Scripture is the soul of theology. It is obviously foundational in liturgy. And the study of Tradition, that is the lived experience of the faith across the centuries,

especially that of the Fathers of the Church, means that the treasures of the past will never be lost. These Fathers figure importantly with the Scriptures in the divine office recited daily, as the Sisters do here in Boarbank Hall.

Human Nature

Every aspect of human nature, good and bad finds expression in the Scriptures. The atrocities committed by the winners and losers are noted in the biblical narratives. For every John the Baptist there is a Herod, for every Jeremiah there is a shocking heir to good King Josiah. There are saints and sinners everywhere in the Bible, with one perfect presence in the New Testament- Jesus himself. The New Testament writers show what a gauntlet he ran for goodness from the beginning to the end of his life. The Scriptures reflect a series of traditions. All the major Christian churches who are seeking Christian unity- and trying to help each other to find it, observe traditions. Tradition is very much respected today. "The Bible Alone" slogan, once used often, was unhelpful for Christian discipleship. Catholics especially, and indeed Christians in general, are urged to interpret the Bible in the Church with its Tradition- in the pursuit of holiness for all.

Conclusion

Thank God there is one season in the year when persons of all beliefs and none show publicly and privately the importance of being human and contribute to making this a reality. There are some major constants in human nature accepted by all. Out there now some of the abandoned lost and lonely are being cared for. Christmas is the season of love, and love is a name for God (1 Jn 4:80) and for salvation. We are brought back to the realism of grace and truth. A happy Christmas to you all. Amen.

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