

Feast of the Presentation, 2nd February 2020

Malachi 3:1-6; Hebrews 2:14-18; Lk.2:22-40

Round about the time St. Lawrence's was built, up in the Wirral they were also building a church – a monastery really, Birkenhead Priory. It mainly serves as a tourist attraction these days, making much of its big place in local history. Monks from the Priory operated the first ever 'Ferry Across the Mersey' for hundreds of years. King John visited in 1201 as part of his plans to attack Ireland, and in 1271 King Edward held a summit in the Priory to settle a border dispute with Scotland.

The most interesting bit of the history though came way back in 1150, but remained unknown until 1898. That was when the largely ruined buildings were gifted to Birkenhead Corporation, who carried out a careful survey of their new acquisition. And they found, at the base of one of the buttresses, a very small and skilfully designed cavity. Inside were the remains of a sheep. What was it doing there? We can only speculate, but the best guess is that it was some kind of 'foundation sacrifice', a way of invoking God's blessing on a new building. Some scholars have used it as evidence as to how old pagan habits died hard: Christianity has never really done animal sacrifice, but pre-Christian cultures most definitely did, and such practices did not vanish overnight when the Gospel arrived. Sometimes they remained like the sheep bones: buried, largely forgotten, but in the foundations.

The readings today are all about sacrifice. Malachi speaks of the Lord coming to his Temple, and how when He gets there He will refine the people like gold and silver until they present offerings – sacrifices - to Him in righteousness. The Letter to the Hebrews calls Christ the merciful and faithful High Priest, who makes the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. The Gospel tells of the infant Jesus being brought to the Temple, so sacrifice can be offered for him. Often we run away from this theme: we call today Candlemas and make it an excuse for yet another cheerful sermon about Jesus the Light of the World – but no. There's not a candle in sight in today's readings. The best visual aid for today's sermon would not be a pretty little candle flame, but a freshly slaughtered sheep.

Well, what does sacrifice have to do with you? At first sight, it might seem like one of those customs that was important to the Jews and indeed to many of our pagan ancestors, almost universal across pre-modern culture – but now lost to us forever, something we can never really get inside the meaning of. But I wonder if we really are quite so far away from it. And as evidence that we might not be, let me for the second week running point out a hymn in the new hymnbook we shall seldom, if ever, sing. I give you Number 355, ‘I vow to thee my country’:

*I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love
The love that asks no question, the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar, the dearest and the best.
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted, the final sacrifice.*

Now, despite the fact that I love singing it, that will not feature in our worship here very often. Because you *shouldn't* vow to your country all earthly things above – your family, your children, the church, the poor, the weak are all earthly things too, and matter at least as much as your country. And you definitely *should* ask questions about what patriotism presumes to demand. Now, we can argue about all that afterwards. But even if like me you find it difficult to justify singing that hymn intellectually, it is hard to deny that something about it strikes a chord deep within. It moves us, despite ourselves. And that's because, I think, it speaks to something very deep within: the sense that being human is about being summoned. Being summoned to give ourselves to *something*, to give ourselves entire and whole and perfect. It speaks to the sense that life is not about getting and spending, accumulating. Deep in our hearts, we know without being taught that we are meant to *give*. That's what life is about – not success, not fame, not wealth, but *gift*. We know that a life spent accumulating, however impressive it seems, is in fact rather empty. It has missed the point.

This, incidentally, is what being made in the image of God really means. It doesn't mean that God has two arms or two legs, that he is a man with a beard in the sky. Nor is it just about our intellect and power. Otherwise the smartest and strongest would be the best image of God, and perhaps a computer even more so. No, to be in the image of God is to be able to give – to give oneself away with utter abandon, utter freedom, without holding anything in reserve or demanding anything back. That's how we see God giving on the Cross: entire and whole and perfect. And Christians have seen in that moment a kind of window into what God is like always and everywhere, from the very beginning. They've come to believe that the whole of reality is founded and sustained by an astonishing act of generosity. Indeed, if you want to know what the word 'God' means, you'd do well to think of a great well of giving at the heart of everything, a power which gives everything life, and which suffers in the labour of bringing everything to glory. The image of the pregnant woman for God does not get used often in Scripture, but it is there – and it's not a bad one. The One who gives, who suffers, so that others might live.

That's what God is like. That's what we are called to reflect, and we are acutely conscious that we do not. We can't give like that, most of us. We're held back, we're small, cramped and cramped in our loving. Why? The Letter to the Hebrews gets it spot on: all our lives we have been held in slavery by the fear of death. Held in slavery by the fear of death. Now, you might say, 'hold on: I'm not scared of death. I never even think about death.' And perhaps you are right, but for many people the reason *why* they don't think about it is precisely because they're scared stiff. So scared they bury the fear deep down. But it is still there, and seeps through in so many other ways. Why are you obsessed with looking beautiful? Why so much energy put into getting money, power, status, respect? Why so concerned with being impressive, making your mark? Because, ultimately, you're scared. Scared of slipping away, of being nothing: scared of death. Somebody very wise once said, our very worst sins usually spring from the fear that we are nothing at all.

We need to give ourselves, because we are made to give; we cannot give ourselves, because we are frightened. So who will set us free? And this is the Gospel. God, seeing that we cannot give ourselves, seeing that we are curved up in tight little balls of fear ... God comes among us, as one of us, in Jesus, and gives Himself for us. He lives the life of love, entire and whole and perfect. He lives right into the death we are so scared of, embraces the things which terrify us most – pain, shame, despair, rejection. And from inside them, He speaks to us. He says: ‘you see this thing you fear? This path of giving, unclenching, pouring yourself out: you’re frightened that it ends here, on a Cross. But I have gone before you, and I have made a way through. What you thought was the end is the beginning; what you thought a blank wall is a door, a door into the Kingdom. Come with me. Give me your hand. Dare to give yourself, dare to die, do it all with me, and I will see you through. You can be what you were made to be. You can be the image and glory of God. I’ll help you. Give me your hand, ask for my help, and I will make you love like you have never loved before. I’ll purify you like gold and silver, like old Malachi said. I’ll burn the selfishness and greed and fear out of you, and you will be an offering to the Lord in righteousness. You will be pure gift.’

That’s what being a Christian is. We’re asking the one true Gift, the One Great Sacrifice, Jesus, the one who loved entire and whole and perfect and who therefore burned up death and lives forever in the glory of God, we’re asking Him to hold our hand. To help us. To breathe his fire within us, to set us free from the fear of death, free to love and give like we have never done before. We ask Him to do all that, and we know that He will. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.