

Daily Prayer

Thomas Becket

Wednesday, December 30, 2020

We enter into a time of quiet. We offer to God our selves and in the silence know that God embraces us as God's very own. We offer our hopes and our concerns through our prayers and in the silence listen for God. Today we hold in our prayers the ordinary moments in life—the trials and the joys.—and remember Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1170 (transferred)

We begin by saying

Zeal for your house has eaten me up;

○ Lord, be swift and answer me, for I am in distress.

Psalm 69.10a, 19b

The First Reading

Now after the death of Jehoiada the officials of Judah came and did obeisance to the king; then the king listened to them. They abandoned the house of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, and served the sacred poles and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD; they testified against them, but they would not listen.

Then the spirit of God took possession of Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada; he stood above the people and said to them, 'Thus says God: Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has also forsaken you.' But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD. King Joash did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada, Zechariah's father, had shown him, but killed his son. As he was dying, he said, 'May the LORD see and avenge!'

2 Chronicles 24.17-22

The Psalm

For your sake have I suffered reproach; ♦
shame has covered my face.

I have become a stranger to my kindred, ♦
an alien to my mother's children.

Zeal for your house has eaten me up; ♦
the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.

I humbled myself with fasting, ♦
but that was turned to my reproach.

I put on sackcloth also ♦
and became a byword among them.

Those who sit at the gate murmur against me, ♦
and the drunkards make songs about me.

But as for me, I make my prayer to you, O Lord; ♦
at an acceptable time, O God.

Answer me, O God, in the abundance of your mercy ♦
and with your sure salvation.

Draw me out of the mire, that I sink not; ♦
let me be rescued from those who hate me
and out of the deep waters.

You know my reproach, my shame and my dishonour; ♦
my adversaries are all in your sight.

Reproach has broken my heart; I am full of heaviness. ♦
I looked for some to have pity, but there was no one,
neither found I any to comfort me.

They gave me gall to eat, ♦
and when I was thirsty, they gave me vinegar to drink.

Let the table before them be a trap ♦
and their sacred feasts a snare.

Psalm 69.7-14, 19-22

The Gospel Reading

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,

and a daughter against her mother,

and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;

and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of

me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not

worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10.34-39

We continue with the reflection that follows. In silence, we ask what the reading has to say to us today. Is there something in the reflection that draws us more deeply into the reading? What does God have to say to us? What do we have to ask God?

The Reflection

Nate Wall

Early this week some friends had their newborn daughter baptized.

As I watched over streaming video, the godmother-to-be read familiar baptism words from Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians:

“Don’t you know that whoever is baptized into Christ Jesus is

baptized into his death?” Minutes later the priest cupped water

over the baby’s crown, thumbed some oil into the shape of cross on

her little forehead, and said, “With this sign I mark you as Christ’s

own.”

Sleepwalk through an occasion like this, like I usually do, and the whole thing comes off lovely, sentimental. Accidentally pay wide-eyed attention, though, and it delivers a shock. I stared at the screen. Did we just unite a newborn child with grisly martyrdom? And now we're clapping, eyes welling with joy.

To a once irreligious Canadian kid like me, Christmas now delivers precisely the same shock.

It's not that my family didn't celebrate Christmas. Our Sears catalogue was always well thumbed-through by the last week of December; by ten in the morning each December 25th our living room carpet was always blanketed by shredded paper; and three days later our minivan's mileage, our refrigerator shelves, and my family's waistlines bore all the signs of back-to-back celebrations. As far as I knew, this just was Christmas.

It was no small surprise, then, after I found myself won over by the person of Jesus and joined the Church, to have my old sentimental Christmas torn away. Replacing it was a practice of Christmas more wonderful, but also much stranger, than anything I'd known. Like Dickens' Scrooge, I felt like I had been subjected to three yuletide revelations.

Revelation one: December had once buzzed with the electricity of commercial benevolence. Now the month belonged to the candle-by-candle yearning of Advent. A different kind of preparation altogether.

Revelation two: Advent's fast crescendoed not simply in Christmas Day but in a whole Christmas Season, twelve days of all-out feast stretching into the new year. (At last the song made sense, even if a pear tree containing a partridge continues to feel more like an elaborate prank than a welcome gift.)

Revelation three: Most of the twelve days of Christmas have something to do with death. For example, December 26 marks “The Feast of Saint Stephen,” which means that while everyone scrambles for Boxing Day Savings, the Church celebrates its earliest martyr—a faithful Jewish disciple of Jesus stoned to death in Jerusalem.

December 28 marks “The Feast of the Holy Innocents,” those babies of Bethlehem hunted down by Herod and massacred to shore up his power against the rumour of a threat to his throne. And then December 30 marks the most obscure feast day: the Commemoration of Saint Thomas Becket. If you know him at all, it might be as the subject of T. S. Eliot’s play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. Thomas was Archbishop in England during the 12th century. As Eliot’s play telegraphs, he was in fact assassinated right in the cathedral. It seems that King Henry II, whose freewheeling political agenda Thomas had opposed one time too many in God’s name, was heard wishing he was rid of the pesky bishop. A group of patriots—fellow baptized Christians—who were eager to curry royal favour granted the king’s wish.

Merry Christmas.

The Church remembered Thomas while it left Henry’s memory to fade. In time, Thomas was sewn into the quilt of our Christmas celebrations. Why? I suspect Thomas was remembered because his death comes off as an almost eerily conspicuous echo of Scripture, as if the Bible were foreshadowing him. *Chronicles*, a little known book from the Old Testament, includes the story of King Joash and a pesky priest named Zechariah, who, rather than soothe the king’s conscience had the gall to call out the king’s religious infidelity. Soon after, “And they conspired against him and stoned him at the king’s command in the courts of the house of the Lord“ (2 Chron

24:21). A murder in the cathedral. "Zeal for Your house has consumed me," prays the Psalmist (Ps 69:8). The words could belong to Thomas Becket. They do belong to him; and his memory lives as an invitation to the simple, flinty courage of faith in a world of expediency.

Still, why plot Becket among the feasts of Christ's Nativity? This is the season of hope's realization. "Unto us a Child is born!" we hear. "Joy to the world!" we sing. What truck can the birth of Mary's child have with Becket's grisly death?

Here the oddity of baptism chimes with Christmas. Listen to the voice of Mary's son in our Gospel reading. The one we rightfully call Prince of Peace says he comes to "bring a sword" (Matt 10:34). How so? Because, he says, "I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man will find his enemies under his own roof." Like Zechariah and Saint Stephen did. Like the Holy Innocents did. Like Thomas Becket. Like Jesus himself did.

God's love incarnate comes to tent with us—that's the Christmas news. Rest is here. Comfort beyond measure. Joy your heart is too small to hold. But God's love resists any taming. Like a flame, it catches. Our hearts burn for our Maker and Visitor—this generous Host of all creatures, now become the Houseguest of humanity—and this love eats away at our old loyalties. It kindles the simple courage of faith. Christmas people are those learning to speak the truth, stand their ground, pray for people who have it in for us, knowing that Mary's child showed us the path of peace: "Whoever gains his life will lose it; whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it" (Matt 10:35–36, 38–9).

Zechariah and Thomas Becket gained more than they lost. That's the wild, and shocking generosity of the God of Christmas. So let

today bring us another chance to welcome this Child of Peace who wields a sword that threatens our expedient loyalties, whose love christens our foreheads like oil, marking us with the sign of death-become-life.

When the time is right, we conclude our time of silence with the canticle

The Canticle ~ A Song of Trust

We have a strong city; he sets up salvation
as walls and bulwarks. ♦

Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps
faith may enter in.

You will keep him in perfect peace,
whose mind is stayed on you, ♦
because he trusts in you.

Trust in the Lord for ever, ♦
for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.

The way of the righteous is level; ♦
you who are upright make smooth
the path of the righteous.

In the path of your judgements, O Lord, we wait for you; ♦
your name and renown is the desire of our soul.

My soul yearns for you in the night, ♦
my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.

For when your judgements are in the earth, ♦
the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, ♦
for indeed all that we have done you have done for us.

Isaiah 26.1-4, 7-9, 12

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The reflection: Nate Wall

Church of the Redeemer

162 Bloor Street West Toronto, ON M5S 1M4

416.922.4948

office@theredeemer.ca

www.TheRedeemer.ca

Twitter: @theRedeemerTO

Facebook: theRedeemerTO

Instagram: theRedeemerTO