Of a Sacred Family

4th Sunday Advent

December 22nd, 2019

I love the wooden sculptures of my nativity set. The elegant but simple lines that carve the forms and faces of the sacred family have always given me a sense of peace and a reminder of where and to Whom I belong. Christmas is a gathering of men and women around a Saviour. It is a holiday that tells a very simple story. Once upon a time, there was a very kind person who had beautiful children, and he gave them the best gifts—a garden to live in and to cultivate, the freedom to seek and to learn and grow, and one simple prohibition to protect them from harm. Sadly, they did not follow this good parent’s counsel, and they transgressed, eating from a prohibited tree. They had to leave the garden; they lost their relationship with their heavenly parent. They were orphans now, in exile, wandering this once good earth, lost in the shadow of their sin and their coming deaths. And though it may not be scholarly or dogmatically correct to say so, the divine parent missed them, for he had lost their intimate companionship, the joy of seeing them enjoy his garden, the peace that bound them together. The parent was an orphan, too. As time wore on, the children and their children, and many generations of children foundered in the shadows. The good parent sent messengers telling them that there was a way to return to the garden, but often, the messengers were ignored, or worse, tortured and murdered. After many long centuries, the good parent went in search of his own—He became one of them and was born to them. The heavenly Father did not want his children to be orphans, and I suspect that He did not want to be orphaned, either. When the time was right, He came to them, so that they could come to Him (John 14-15, James 4:8).

Throughout Advent, we have searched the ancient and premodern liturgy from different continents, different languages, different cultures, all from people that responded to the Good News and praised the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. And today, we incline our ears to hear from conquerors and the conquered, from colonists and those colonized. In the twilight years of the Western Roman Empire, a man without any qualifications was suddenly elected bishop. It is not seldom that God knows our purpose in life before we know. St. Ambrose, or Aurelius Ambrosius, was the governor of Milan during a great crisis in the city, a sharp conflict between the Arians and the Nicene Christians. When the bishop died, Ambrose went to church to try to see if he could settle things, when, much to his surprise, the crowd cried out: *“Ambrose, bishop!”* And this was interesting, because Ambrose was not even baptized yet, nor trained in theology. Despite trying to refuse, within a week he was baptized, consecrated, and installed as the bishop. Milan was happy; the Nicene Christians glad that one of their own had been elected, the Arians pleased because they appreciated the charity that Ambrose showed to them. Through love, the bishop, the spiritual parent of the city, brought peace and reconciliation to the children of Milan. It is no wonder, then, that he could write such a beautiful hymn about the advent of salvation in the birth of Christ:

*Veni, redemptor gentium*

O come, Redeemer of the earth,

Show to the world Thy virgin birth;

Let age to age the wonder tell;

Such birth, O God, beseems Thee well.

No earthly father Thou dost own;

By God’s o’ershadowing alone

The Word made flesh to man is come,

The fair fruit of a mother’s womb.

A maiden pure and undefiled

Is by the Spirit great with child;

Like standard fair, her virtues tell,

‘Tis God within her deigns to dwell.

Forth from His chamber cometh He,

The court and bower of chastity;

Henceforth in two-fold substance one,

A giant glad His course to run.

From God the Father He proceeds,

To God the Father back He speeds;

Runs out His course to death and hell,

Returns on God’s high throne to dwell.

O ancient as the Father Thou,

Gird on our flesh for victory now;

The weakness of our mortal state

With deathless might invigorate.

E’en now Thy manger glows, new light

Is born upon the breath of night.

Let darkness ne’er eclipse the ray,

And faith make everlasting day.

All praise to God the Father be,

All praise, Eternal Son, to Thee,

Whom with the Spirit we adore,

Forever and for evermore.

For Ambrose, the Advent is nuptial as well as natal. The Son of God is described the same way the sunrise is described in one of my favourite psalms, Psalm 19: “In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hidden from its heat.” Nothing is hidden from the heat of the sun in our solar system; likewise, nothing is hidden from the love of God who sent His Son to wed the bride, the church, the sacred family that God wished to redeem. In the words of Ambrose, “Forth from His chamber cometh He, The court and bower of chastity; Henceforth in two-fold substance one, A giant glad His course to run. From God the Father He proceeds, To God the Father back He speeds.” All things have flown out from God and all things return to God. The Incarnation of Christ is compared to the course of the Sun which gives life to all beings on Earth; and the Son of God is eager and strong in running this course. Despite the sorrows that it will entail, He is joyful—“a giant glad His course to run.” It is also a song about what love looks like—love is the eagerness of a husband and wife wanting to be together. Love makes its home in us, and love is pictured to us as the Mother who will give birth to our Saviour: “O come, Redeemer of the earth, Show to the world Thy virgin birth; Let age to age the wonder tell; Such birth, O God, beseems Thee well. No earthly father Thou dost own; By God’s o’ershadowing alone The Word made flesh to man is come, The fair fruit of a mother’s womb. A maiden pure and undefiled Is by the Spirit great with child; Like standard fair, her virtues tell, ‘Tis God within her deigns to dwell.” Love looks like a mother great with child. The days of the western Roman Empire were numbered when Ambrose wrote these words—but they were not the last time Italy would see empires. In time, she would see the banking empire of the Lombards and Florentines, the Kingdom of Sicily built by the Normans, the mercantile and naval empires of Genoa and Venice with overseas outposts and even colonies in the Balkans. In the modern era, Italy would become the seat of a short-lived fascist empire. All of those empires came and went, but the church lived and lives on, despite its fractions, corruptions, and even disruptions. And it is this church that inspired many great gifts to humanity—the science of Galileo, the artwork of Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Michelangelo, the literature of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, And of course, we cannot forget a great number of saints—St. Francis, St. Clare, St. Catherine of Siena, and many more. One saint who was not born in Italy, but who was converted there and was mentored in his faith and likely baptized by Ambrose was none other than St. Augustine, who had his conversion experience in a garden in Milan. I briefly want to return to Fra Angelico, one of the great painters of Renaissance Italy. He was famous for painting “sacred conversations”—scenes in which Mary, the mother of Jesus, is conversing with renowned saints or theologians. For him, the communion of saints was real. The church is a living family of those who have gone before us and those yet to come—all of us gathered around this miraculous and amazing revelation of salvation being born into our history in the person of the Lord Jesus.

More than a thousand years passed since our first hymn by Ambrose, when another Italian, Cristoforo Colombo of Genoa, in the service of the Spanish crown, sailed three ships to what would be called the *otro mundo,* the other world, or the *novus mundi,* the new world. These continents would soon be named for another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci. And thus, other empires arose, their soldiers and sailors crossing the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans to steal, rape, murder, enslave and colonize, often in the name of the Gospel that never preached a single one of those things. Thus, Spain, Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands carved up the continents of the Americas and transported millions of slaves from Africa to work to death in plantations, homes, building projects, armies in this new world. And yet, it was not new to the people who lived here. It was their Old World that they had named with their ancient languages. Because of the grace of God, where there is darkness, light still grows. Despite the coercion, the countless deaths from new diseases, war, famine, and poor living conditions, despite having every reason not to trust the missionaries who spoke of a foreign God while often representing the interests of foreign swords and coffers, nevertheless many natives of these lands and many of the slaves brought over still embraced the hope of the real Gospel, the Gospel that Jesus preached, the one that spoke of making peace, of yielding to others, of forgiving, of sharing, of praying quietly, of loving our brothers and sisters, of caring for our wives and husbands, of being salt and light in the earth. In the early years of this nation’s history, the Jesuits or “Black Robes” wandered in the forests of Eastern Canada and America, preaching the gospel among the First Nations. One of these missionaries was Jean de Brebeuf, who penned one of our favourite Christmas hymns we call “The Huron Carol”. The Huron people suffered in extraordinary ways—many of them becoming displaced and having to migrate. I imagine the idea of a heavenly kingdom and an eternal home must have appealed to them as they frequently faced starvation, exile and death in war. They lived the same kinds of lives we read of in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13-16). The orphans and exiles of history long for home—they want to belong, they want to have community, they want love. While the modern English lyrics to the Huron Carol are certainly very beautiful, the actual lyrics in the Huron or Wendat language speak with much more urgency, much more joy, much more jubilation at the Advent of having a new family to belong to, the very family of God Himself. In the literal English translation of the original Wendat, the carol reads thus:

Have courage, you who are humans. Jesus, He is born.

Behold, it has fled, the spirit who had us as prisoner.

Do not listen to it, as it corrupts our minds, the spirit of our thoughts.

They are spirits, coming with a message for us, the sky people.

They are coming to say, 'Come on, be on top of life, rejoice!'

'Mary has just given birth, come on, rejoice.'

'Three have left for such a place; they are men of great matter.'

'A star that has just appeared over the horizon leads them there.'

'He will seize the path, a star that leads them there.'

As they arrived there, where He was born, Jesus.

The star was at the point of stopping, He was not far past it.

Having found someone for them, He says, 'Come here.'

Behold, they have arrived there and have seen Jesus.

They praised a name many times saying,

'Hurray, He is good in nature.'

They greeted Him with respect,

Oiling His scalp many times, saying, 'Hurray!'

'We will give to Him honour to His name.'

'Let us oil His scalp many times, show reverence for Him,

As He comes to be compassionate with us.'

It is providential that you love us, and think

'I should make them part of My family.'

That is a beautiful song. It has to be one of the most beautiful hymns ever written. The sky people have brought us a message that only the sky can proclaim—the glorious love and work of God for us. In this carol, the coming of God is neighbourly—we are invited to go see a new birth. It is remarkable, lordly, but nonetheless earthy and immediate. It is not that far away. It is a time for rejoicing: “'Come on, be on top of life, rejoice!' 'Mary has just given birth, come on, rejoice.'” Three led by a star come rejoicing to witness the event. And why are they rejoicing? They praise His name because “He is good in nature”. History can be so full of injustice, so very full of injustice and tragedy. What is more, those things in history that we take to be as strong and enduring and monolithic as granite are often just chaff in the wind. And not just trivial things—but important, needful things, too. The vicissitudes of life and history come and go, often painfully, and yet there remains what is unchanged, what is perfect, what is good—and that is our God and His love for humanity. In the carol, the three show reverence to God “As He comes to be compassionate with us.”Words like compassion can seem abstract. Nevertheless, we know compassion when it is lived and shown. Jean de Brebeuf and his Huron friends knew what it meant when they saw it, as well. Love is family. Love is hospitality. Love is gathering together in communion. Love is salt and light, those basic ingredients we want at our dinner table. Love is grace, reverence and praise. Love is the quiet as the baby sleeps and the mother rests. Love is reconciliation. Love is the gathering of conquerors and conquered together as equals before a Servant King. Love is what conquers the conquerors and raises us up the conquered to conquer. Love beats ploughshares out of swords. Love is Joseph trusting the angel and his wife to embrace and make the Christ child his own son. Love is Mary humbly accepting a pregnancy she did not ask for at the worst of times and trusting in the word of God. Love is the Christ child who animates their relationship and shows hospitality to shepherds and magi. Love is God who made us and redeems us and blesses us. In its last lines, the Huron Carol pronounces with profound simplicity and finality one of the most important theological points ever made, the very heart of the gospel message, presenting to us the very thoughtfulness of God for humanity, saying: “It is providential that you love us, and think ‘I should make them part of My family’”. The carol brings us into the mind of God, and God is saying, “I should make humanity part of my family”. God loves you and feels for you the way the mother holds the baby, the way Mary cradles the Christ child. This is the sign from God, as it says in Isaiah: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). God’s indelible love becomes our eternal abode, our dwelling place, filled with visitors, friends, even oxen and asses, rabbits and elk. Look up, everyone; look around you. Behold, the sacred family and its sacred conversation, gathered together in love around the Christ who was born in Bethlehem. *In excelsis Gloria!*