

ST NICHOLAS OF MYRA
December 6, 2007
University of King's College Chapel, at Mass

The Son of Man cometh at an hour when ye think not. (St Luke 12:40)

The old fears of this season have returned. The terrible anxieties which the modern sciences once exorcised they have now revalidated. During these nights as we descend, step by step, into deeper darkness, cold, and death, we must again fear that, for humankind and for our world, there will be no turn back upward to life. With *Silent Spring* forty-five years ago Rachel Carson first warned of a descent which would not culminate at the fulcrum point where death is conquered by resurrection. The sacred and natural cycle would yield to the monochrome of secular monotony, mere repetition of the same, the continuation of mortality. Carson's prophetic voice was once lonely. Now, however, an almost unanimous chorus foreseeing the imminence of catastrophe has joined her threnody. They intone a new rendition of the Sequence from the Mass for the Dead:

Dies irae, dies illa.
Solvat seculum in favilla
Teste David cum Sibylla

Day of wrath, that dreadful day,
Heaven and earth shall in ashes lay,
As David and the Sybil say.

Pagan and Jewish prophecy are unanimous, the dread-filled old sequence combines the wisdom of Sibyls from East and West with King David the psalmist. This combination Michelangelo repeated on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel where feminine intuition matches male foresight. He placed the Sibyl from Libyan Africa alongside Babylonian Daniel, and Judah's Isaiah is enthroned between the Sibyls of Italian Cumae and Grecian Delphi. Ezekiel among the Chaldeans, Jeremiah in Jerusalem, and Joel share knowledge of what is coming in earth and heaven with prophetesses from Ionian Erithraea and Persia. For Lactantius, the 3rd century Christian hymn writer and poet, all these foresaw the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, coming for better and for worse. The ancient Christian fathers who inseminated the Platonic womb and brought Christian doctrine to birth were just as demanding as the great Hellenic Platonists. For both Christian and pagan, truth must bring into concord the religions and philosophies of antiquity: the novelties of Greece and Rome must be harmonised with the pristine theology of the ancient Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Hebrews. The gospels themselves undertook the concordance: thus Zoroastrian Priest-Kings, the Magi, are led by their astrological contemplations to worship the Most High at the crib of Bethlehem. Prudentius in the 4th century sang of what the Father's love bears:

He is Alpha from that Fountain
All that is and hath been flows
He is Omega, of all things
Yet to come the mystic close
This is he, whom seer and sibyl
Sung in ages long gone by...

From this tradition Dante took Virgil to be his guide down through the dark cold of the disordered loves of Hell and out into the sun light of reordering purgation. By pagan wisdom and virtue the Christian poet

regained harmony with the cosmos so that he was perfectly disposed to the love which moves the sun and the stars.

What do these poets, seers, and sibyls see? For the fundamental vision look to today's Gospel set for celebrations of the saintly lords of the church, the bishops like Nicolas from the 4th century, our "jolly old St Nic." In it our Lord Jesus addresses the servants—read slaves—of God, those, who, as in this season, wait for his advent at "an hour when they think not," an hour and a form in which he is not expected. If they are watching, if they are like the "virgins wise", Jesus promises that the Lord himself shall "make them to sit down to meat, and will come and serve them." Hierarchical order will be turned upside down, the Lord will become the servant, a waiter at a table where slaves command. The turning we seek in this season, the turning for which we hope, the turning upon which life depends, the conversion for which we must pray, requires a reversal, and the pivot point for this wheel is here.

At the table where the master serves slaves, we see the Christian rendition of what a pagan Roman festival also celebrated before the December equinox, the Saturnalia, a feast which our Christmas succeeded. Old Saturn, god of the original paradise or chaos—the ambiguity is of the essence—before the Olympians imposed their order from heaven, was honoured during six days: students went on holiday, gifts were scattered like snow, gay party dress replaced the sober toga, and masters served dinner to their slaves, waiting at the table.

This was one of the many festivals of misrule which Charles Taylor claims were characteristic of what preceded our brief and limited *Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007) [45-50]. Taylor writes:

These were periods in which the ordinary order of things was inverted or "the world turned upside down". For a while, there was a ludic interval, in which people played out a condition of reversal of the usual order. Boys wore the mitre, or fools were made kings for a day; what was ordinarily revered was mocked, people permitted themselves various forms of licence.

He observes that scholars have related these medieval Christian festivals to the Roman Saturnalia, to other similar festivals in ancient Mesopotamia, and also to the Aztec renewals of the world.

The theory is that:

...[O]rder binds a primitive chaos which is both its enemy but also the source of all energy, including that of order...the need for anti-structure was understood [spiritually]...: the human code exists within a larger spiritual cosmos, and its opening to anti-structure is...required to keep the society in true harmony with the cosmos, to draw on its forces.

All depends on entering the turning point where death becomes life. Our dying servant saviour is both on the side of anti-structure, dissolution, chaos, and also on the side of structure, connection, order. The earliest Christians proclaim this dual necessity in their underground tomb cities, the catacombs. There they so died as to live again. In this underworld gateway to heaven, they depicted Christ not only in Jewish Jonah but also in the Greek Heracles and Orpheus, and, in the catacomb frescos, Mary first became the Madonna with child by being imaged through Egyptian Isis with the infant Horus. Jonah swallowed by a whale, after three days was vomited out upon dry land; the many toiling Heracles despoiled Hell and brought back the wife of his friend; Opheus by his music charmed the terrible powers of the underworld for the sake of his beloved; Isis, Queen of Heaven, was Mother of the reborn god. These all manifested the truth confessed in the Christian baptismal creed: the Saviour descended into hell and the third day he rose again—the descent and resurrection which baptism itself re-enacted. The early Christians wagered

their lives on this common truth. Common, because these frescos not only make pagan poet, seer, and sibyl point to the truth of Christianity, but, by them, Christians also testify that they needed to learn what the nations knew.

For ancient and medieval Christians, and for the nations invoking a cosmic saviour, the great issue is not just individual immortality. Humanity itself survives only by prayer. Lady Philosophy, in the *Consolation* of Boethius, always the voice of the great ancient religious and philosophical *consensus*, tells us that, without hope and prayer, the only connecting link between men and God will be cut off. The human race (*humanum genus*), no longer adhering to its nurturing cause, falling away from its source, is torn apart and disjointed. Humanity falls to pieces (*Consolatio* 5.2).

Here and now, again tonight, in response to the proper fears of this season, we re-enter the pattern established from time immemorial, we invoke the dying and resurrected man-god, ritually re-enact his life-giving descent and ascent. No longer enough for us in our global crisis is the modern piety content to find a private space for religion. Sacrifice, ritual, prayer are not solely for fashioning the beautiful soul or manufacturing personal exaltations, nor only for making us sensitive to one another, nor is their work complete even when they have drawn us into the form of divine justice and charity, so that these roll down like rivers. We also need to recollect and re-enact what moved the founders of chapels of this kind—the myriad religious and royal, episcopal, monastic and academic temples of daily ritual and prayer, established because their founders believed that if the connection to the cosmic order were lost, humanity, torn apart and cut up, would fall to pieces. They believed that without the *opus dei*, the work of prayer, the year would not turn toward life; Spring would be silent. It is hard for us, accustomed to the privatization of religion in the secular age, to recognise the crucial corporate and cosmic importance of these our petitions, to believe that the turn from death to life for humanity depends on entering, by *public* ritual and *corporate* supplication, the *cosmic* revolution. It is only there that thoughts become words and deeds match reasons. On that wheel the sequence may also be reversed: repeated good deeds become habits, virtuous discipline awakens hope, and hope arouses prayer. Corporately, even if not individually, the circle must be, and can be, complete. The *junction* of Alpha and Omega is crucial; neither the sequence, nor the point of entry matter.

We, with St Nicolas, are stewards of the mysteries of God and, thereby, of creation. Upon our words, prayers, thoughts, and deeds, God has willed to make Spring depend so that grace may again be green.

Conditor alme siderum
Exaudi preces supplicum
 Nourishing Creator of the Stars
 Hear our prayers.