

Sermon: From the Church's Year Sunday next before Advent 2006

Advent

This is the night month
Of wilderness voices
And exotic creatures
The lion and the adder,
The asp and the cockatrice,
The wolf and the calf
And a little child to lead them.
The darkness fretted with
The sound of a golden chorus
Concerning one coming to rule.
What went we out for to see?
Jewels in the night air,
The broad fields, the winding river
And moonlight soaking the moor.
The world and its three dimensions,
The natural imprint of the brooding Trinity.

The Holy Nativity of Our Blessed Lord – Sermon, Christmas Day 2002...

Picture a snowbound lake and a burning barn,
Or a house inhabited by the moon:
See how the beams of cunning silver light
Send out the radiance of the Eternal Girl.
See now a cowshed in the dead of winter,
And in the thickening darkness, fire
Like a galleon ablaze upon the sea.
The pinprick stars nod in their wisdom;
Three bare trees bend on the horizon
Under all that silveriness
To remind us that birth and death are
The start and end of the same reality.
His mother holds him now
As she will hold him again
In thirty years, under that sparse hill:
Mary, Maria, Mater Dolorosa, Ewig-Weibliche, Princess
In the crib of thine arms is our salvation born.
But today it is the angels' song
Brash, radiant; fire and the flicker of fire,
All incipient, telling us what we do not want to know:
That darkness will cover the earth
From the sixth hour to the ninth;
And that the spirits of the saints will
Walk abroad on a Friday afternoon.
Only, for this moment
Heaven and earth are in this barn:

She looks and he looks back at her:
There is a small movement –
The slight adjustment of his shawl;
Her hand moves in a half-light gesture, slow.
As kings and shepherds, stars and distant worlds
Behold the little boy from heaven:
Darling Jesus,
Emmanuel, thou art come,
Come, rejoice us,
And turn our hearts to thee

The Epiphany of Our Blessed Lord

In the golden light of these gifts
Incense rises.
In those days when God was young
In the cowshed;
Then steward to that couple by the lake,
The water pots filled with water,
The water made wine.
Little boats on the Sea of Tiberius,
Like 18th century virginals:
Simple: the sort of sketch Picasso would do
On his napkin to pay for his dinner.
Delicate crafts like musical instruments;
Old man Hermon over the lake,
And a meandering of currents down to Masada.
“Will you come again, Jesus, and tell us that it’s true –
that it’s all true;
And we are not mere husks or empty shells
Cast upon that shore?”
There is life here,
I am under the velvet skin of it,
And the ointment with the purple,
The alabaster box and the woman’s tears.
I love, I think,
But I know not what I love:
Teach me, my God and King.
And when the twilight broods
Over Magdala and Cana,
Capernaum and the little house where once thou sayest,
“Whether is easier to say, ‘Thy sins be forgiven thee, or else,
Arise, take up thy bed and walk’?”
It is the early spring now of thy healing
And the nervous flowers come with music:
I hear, O Sacred Head, and that
The duteous day now closeth.
I lie here in fear and ecstasy.
Remove, O Lord, the types and shadows,
The accursed figures of speech,

The lying similes.
Bring on the harpsichord boats and
The water pots of wine;
The golden light of the first gifts,
The sun, early, east of Jordan:
Frankincense –
And myrrh.

Presentation

When he was twelve...
Imagine an adolescent Christ,
The scourge of his Mother,
In the temple
Soprano, piping his questions to the elders –
Questions to which he, insubordinate, was the answer:
Who revealed himself in flesh
Hid himself in Childhood.

Lent

What is the world doing while it waits on spring?
The earth itself, half open, aching
 Trees sparse, assenting, murmuring;
And a bird, no more than an idiot,
Rummaging, predilecting
 What?
To be part of the scheme of things.

The Nazarene gets up out of the cold water
After the Baptist's absurd appellations
And stands under only the devil's light
In the cracked wilderness of Judea.

The bird observes
Only what there is to see and hear:
"Thou art my Son in whom I am delighted."
And thinking his Creator speaks to him
Flutters away excited.

Good Friday

This April is all death,
The most real thing sin,
With wages in advance
And time to spend them in.
The willow tree is angered by the wind,
The church-bell blown off key:
Howling iridescence
And the walk to Calvary.

God is infinitely bored
By this procession
Of seasonal necessities;
But he makes no digression:
He cannot do otherwise
For his property is extreme:
To be the bloody eternal God
With a Passion to redeem.

Sundays after Trinity

The season of Trinity,
The time of our greening;
Twenty-five weeks without excess.
No star-led kings
With eerie gifts and fragrances;
Shepherds merely abide in the fields
Without the haunting of the angel choir.
No bloody march and scourging;
Or crown of thorns,
Or dead saints abroad in
The darkness between the sixth hour and the ninth.
And women cease their silly tales
Of what they saw that morning
And of how his grave-clothes lay in the sepulchre.
“Put your finger in the holes in my hands
Put your hand in my side” –
No more distasteful stuff like that,
Thank God;
Or men in white apparel
Explaining his ascent.
No more high winds, babble and other
Incommodious disturbances.
No beasts, I’m glad to say,
With umpteen eyes up their behinds.
The frenzy is over and now
The English religion proceeds
Quiet and un-miraculous,
Without embarrassments.
We think of being kind and
“Do as you would be done by”
Restraint and the pastoral sense.
But as you gaze into this green,
Look up at the limestone cliff,
Hear English sparrows chirping un-metaphysical;
And feel for the ghosts within the landscape;
St Peter impetuous in late June;
The Magdalene weeping and the alabaster box;
Three men in white raiment;
His mother going up after him;

Luke the good doctor and a shipwreck east of Troas
And Michael's war in heaven,
With silence for the space of half an hour.
For all the saints,
And the souls he came to save:

But then the late November afternoon:
"O come, O come Emmanuel!"