

ST NICOLAS: SERMON in LETCHWORTH 6 December 2008

Galatians 6,17: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ"

Tales are told of Nicholas 4th century Bishop of Myra in what is now Turkey. Somehow he became patron of Russia. Somehow he became patron of sailors. Seamen in the Eastern Mediterranean would pray, "Nicholas, hold the tiller". Coastal churches in England were dedicated to him, with their steeples as landmarks by which sailors might navigate. His body, it is alleged, was in the 11th century transferred by seamen from Turkey to Bari in Italy. Somehow he became patron of children, perhaps because he was said to have provided dowries for three maidens who might otherwise not have married. The three golden balls of the pawnbroker's sign derive from those three bags of gold.

On December the 6th you will find him in Holland, mounted on a white horse. He is dressed in cope and mitre. He holds his crozier. He is accompanied by his servant Zwart Piet, Black Peter, who carries a bag. From that bag the two of them extract presents for good children. But naughty children are stuffed into that bag and carried off to the King of Spain. A folk memory, this, of the years when Holland was part of the Spanish Empire and good Protestants were cruelly treated by the Inquisition. When the by now free Dutch established a colony in North America, Sint Klaas, as they called him, accompanied them to New Amsterdam (New York). And there Bishop Nicolas morphed into that fat and ruddy monster with his infinity of Ho, Ho, Ho! High priest of Mammon.

I have myself seen Sint Klaas riding through Old Amsterdam. But for me the most pleasing tale about the bishop is that during the persecution by the Roman emperor Diocletian, he suffered imprisonment and torture for Christ; that he was present at the Council of Nicea in 325. I like to think that the Nicene creed, which you and I have just sung, was in part drafted by bishops tortured for Christ, among them St Nicholas. "Henceforth let no man trouble me. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ". Sadly, this tale about Nicolas and Nicea may prove to be as fictional as all the other tales about him. However, I stick to my text, "I bear in my body the marks of Jesus".

Cattle in North America and in Southern Africa are branded with the marks of their owners. The cattle have no say in the matter. Afterwards they may stray, be stolen or be killed, but there is never any doubt as to who they belong or belonged to. They bear in their bodies the distinctive marks of their respective ranchers. So it was and is with the Jew. They did not choose God. It was He who chose them. "I will be your God and you shall be my people", is a refrain repeated throughout the Old Testament books. This one sided compact or deal or agreement between Jehovah and the Hebrews was to be marked by a branding, as it were. "This is my covenant. Every man child among you shall be circumcised, he that is eight days old. The uncircumcised man shall be separated from my people. He has broken my covenant" (Genesis 17). Afterwards the Jew may embrace other allegiances, claim to be agnostic or atheist, but there is never any doubt as to who he belongs or belonged to. He bears in his body the mark of his Owner.

St Paul said of himself, "Of the stock of Israel, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day" (Philippians 3,5). Each year on January the 1st we remember how our Lord was circumcised on the eighth day of His human life. It is shame that the apparent indelicacy of the festival inclines us to concentrate more on His holy name, more on New Year even, than on the the old covenant between God and His people. We shall not adequately understand the new covenant until we adequately understand the old. "This is my blood of the new covenant. I will be your God. You shall be my people."

God has raised up for Himself a new people, a third people, neither Jew nor gentile but Christian. We are called out, chosen, from among all the peoples of the earth to enter into a covenant with Him. We have not chosen Jesus. He chose us. The compact or deal or agreement is also one sided. But the second covenant brings us far far closer to God than ever the first covenant brought the Jews. We are so close to Jesus that we are one with Him. He dwells in us. We dwell in Him. We are His Body. He has given His Spirit or Breath or Life to us. Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, as part of Christ, we are taken up into the life of the Trinity where the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are ever one. Made one with the humanity of Christ, we become "partakers of the divine nature", as St Peter tells us (II Peter 1,4). There are two short words which are the key to all St Paul's writing, *in Christ*. And he repeats them over and over again. For example, let your imagination roam over the implications of Colossians 3,3, "Your life is hid with Christ in God".

An early crisis for the infant church was the admission of gentiles. Was it necessary for gentiles first to become Jews before they became Christian? Or could they become Christian without first passing through Judaism? In other words, must male gentiles be circumcised before they were baptised? The Council of Jerusalem settled the matter in Acts 15. Peter summed up, "Why put a yoke upon their neck which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear? We believe that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they". St Paul concurs later. He refers to this theme over and over again. What matters now is being in Christ. The Lord Jesus is the new Israel. We are the second or new Israel, provided we are in Him.

The sacrament of holy baptism replaces circumcision. We were immersed in water. Alternatively, we had water poured over us. Just as circumcision might be received by an adult or by infant, so might baptism. The water makes no visible brand mark upon us. Yet after the water, the sign of the cross is traced upon our foreheads, "We receive this person into Christ's flock and do sign her with the sign of the cross". The Father, the Son and the Spirit, the angels of God, see that sign upon us even if we don't. Afterwards Christians may embrace other allegiances, claim to be agnostic or atheist, but all heaven sees which Owner we belong to. There is a sense in which all baptised Christians, however easy their discipleship has been, as ours is easy, bear in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ. "We receive this person into Christ's flock and sign her with the sign of the cross, in token that hereafter she shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified and manfully to fight under His banner against sin, the world and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto her life's end".

However, when St Paul speaks of the marks in his body, he is speaking neither of his circumcision into the first covenant, nor of his baptism into the second covenant. He speaks of having been tortured for Christ. "Of the Jews five times received I thirty nine stripes. Three times was I beaten with rods. Once was I stoned" (II Corinthians 11,24 - 25). And a great deal more physical suffering awaited him yet.

We don't know how many of the bishops who drafted the Nicene Creed were imprisoned and tortured. We don't know if St Nicholas was at Nicea or if he so suffered. We do know that down the ages and round the globe millions and millions have been killed for Christ, that even now fellow members of our covenant with God face torture and death. And we are embarrassingly aware of the Letter to the Hebrews: "You", that is you and me, "have not yet resisted unto blood". In one sense, you and I bear in our bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ. But in another we do not - not yet. (Hebrews 12.4)

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