

HOMILY

Abbot of Downside, Dom Aidan Bellenger

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Benedictine abbeys tend to be built on high places, Cistercian abbeys tend to be found in valleys. I hope that Benedictines do not have their noses in the air and do keep their feet firmly on the ground. When I look southwards from my room at Downside I see distinctly on a clear night (and even in Somerset the clouds sometimes disperse) the clouds twinkle with starlight. If I look northwards all I can see is the anonymous half-light of the cities of Bath and Bristol. So much of our world seems to be artificially illuminated that it can be difficult to distinguish night from day. Despite this (or because of this) our world can seem a gloomy place. Stress and depression seem, more prevalent than ever and the optimism (however misplaced) of our ancestors has been replaced by a sense of perplexed puzzlement and pessimism. No wonder the fixed grin of the professionally cheerful seems so out of place.

I am not talking about personal disposition. I remain, by nature, an optimistic person. Nor do my thoughts reflect the dull and wet weather which has dominated our Northern European summer. I suppose we can reflect, in a respite from the rain, on the wonderful greenness of this valley and the richness which moisture brings to the beautiful dry bones of this wonderful place. We must not forget that the sun still shines behind the clouds.

The author of the book of Revelation saw the heavenly Jerusalem as a well-watered place, the river of life giving it comfort and plenty. Medieval monks liked to think of places like this as the earthly pattern of the heavenly city, and the practical utopianism of the monastic ideal remains one of its abiding lessons. St John sees a new world replacing the old, but the world we live in, here and now, must reflect that infinite ideal. Place and time are important, but above all else, as Christians we are called to mirror that charity which sustains our life together.

The Cistercians who built this place saw themselves at the end of time and viewed this beautiful valley as only a prelude, a threshold of the world beyond. They were far more exposed than us to the extremes of nature, but their pre-romantic attitude of positive affirmation towards the Creator and the created order of things reveals their soundly

incarnational theology. If love, **Caritas**, was at the heart of Cistercian spirituality, it was a love made incarnate. Their love of Christ's humanity, and by extension their love for the Mother of God to whom, like all Cistercian places, Tintern was dedicated, made them celebrators of the Incarnation and poets of Creation. As, at this evening hour, we celebrate the birthday of the Mother of God, our thoughts and prayers are brought back to the incarnate heart of our faith -- the gift of God's only Son, which gives renewed meaning to all creation and should dissipate, in true Christian hope, any gloom- or doom-ridden anthropology or nihilistic psychology.

The face of the earth, both the high places and the low places, will be transformed if we see things in the light of the incarnation and rejoice in the humanity of Jesus as his brothers and sisters. He dispels encircling gloom. Bernard of Clairvaux reflects on the Lord's coming in time, 'not at time's beginning, not in the midst of it, but at its end': 'Wisely did wisdom ordain that when evening had come and the day was declining and the light of the knowledge of God was dim and love was waxing cold before the prevalence of weakness ... When all things were in silence and night in the midst of its course, then came your Almighty Word, O Lord, from the royal throne ... when the fullness of time was come, God sent his Son'.

The Incarnation is the doctrine that allows us to see that the Saviour is fully human and to appreciate that his humanity, reflected by his passion, death and resurrection, is a new order of life for us all which elevates our time-tied lives to eternal value. The hope of a complete and eternal life is present in Jesus' life and in the life of all those who follow him. The hope which all mothers see in their children, which Mary most triumphantly and humbly saw in her Son, is the hope which promises eternal happiness. There is no place in Christian hearts for despondency or gloom. The value of each living person is of an eternal preciousness which reflects an all-loving God. True Christian hope is firmly rooted in God's loving presence within us. Hope is the dynamic which makes our lives as Christians possible. St Bernard, reflecting (as he often did) on the Song of Songs, puts it like this: 'There is a place between fear and security like that between the left arm and the right, a central hope, as it were, in which the mind and conscience very happily repose on the soft bed of love... Now anyone who feels that he is firmly established in hope no longer serves in faith but rests in love.'

The monks who came to this place prepared through prayer, patience and vigil for the coming of the Lord. In their round of prayer and simple community life they attempted to live Gospel and Kingdom values. Their life was animated by faith, hope and love. Their benchmark was the

kingdom to come, and it is in that hope that all Christians rejoice. However broken and divided we may seem we are all called to be citizens of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Evening falls on the face of the earth, but hope remains. 'And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.'

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