

Birkenhead, Sunday 5th February 2023

Septuagesima Sunday

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“The spirit of the Lord set me down in the midst of a plain that was full of bones. And he led me about through them on every side: now they were very many upon the face of the plain, and they were exceeding dry.”¹

From the prophecy of the prophet Ezekiel, we are starting again our journey towards the most Holy feast of Easter, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today, Septuagesima Sunday is beginning our liturgical exile, far away from the heavenly Jerusalem: a journey of penance, mortification, of conversion. Conversion in the original meaning of the Latin root of that word: to turn towards. Seventy days which echo the seventy years in Babylon, where the Jews were taken in exile and punishment for not being faithful to God.

But in these years of suffering, God did not completely abandon them. Looking at the miseries of his chosen people, hearing their cries and seeing their tears, he sent them holy men to preach the good word, to announce the Messiah and the Redemption, to convert the sinners and reunite them in friendship with the Lord.

“The terrors of death surged round me, the cords of the nether world enmeshed me. In my distress I called upon the Lord; from His holy temple He heard my voice.”²

The first words of the Introit of today’s mass truly sound terrible, speaking about death and distress. Should we continue upon that way to mourn only about ourselves, or will we listen till the end of the psalm XVII, which the Introit is taken from? The words initially look terrible, but they are an invitation to not fail and fall into the darkness of despair. The second part of the introit tells us the way to follow to bring back to life again these dry bones we saw and mourn about: “In my distress I called upon the Lord; from His holy temple He heard my voice.”³

This psalm XVII, which open the Liturgy of the greatest penance time of the year, was written by King David to thank God who delivered him from his enemies. It tells us the story of these who went through trials and difficulties, and are no longer afraid of them because they victoriously faced them. They are now at peace. Death and suffering are now seen as blessings from the Lord. Why mourning about them? They were the opportunity to purify their souls and make them clean for the Lord. King David is demonstrating us that the most important thing in trials and difficulties is not these difficulties in themselves, but these difficulties as a unique opportunity to call for the help of the Lord, who will always answer.⁴

Everything in the liturgy will appear more and more stripped of any ornaments as we will move towards Easter. Today we gave up the Alleluia, relics upon the altar, we change

¹ Ezekiel, XXXVII, 1-2

² Ps. XVII, 5-7, Introit

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dom Ludovic Baron, *L'Expression du chant grégorien*, Vol. 1, Septuagesima Sunday

vestments for the violet colour. On Ash Wednesday, we will give up flowers and the chant of the organ. On Passion Sunday, all statues and crosses will be covered in purple. Step by step, the liturgy will teach us to strip our affections, and present ourselves as we are, poor and weak in front of the Lord, from whom we will receive everything.

A lukewarm soul will see these exterior things and might feel very depressed if spiritual life is not awakened quick enough. For this reason, the Holy Church presents us with the Psalm IX for the chant of the Gradual:

“A helper in due time in tribulation. Let them trust in thee who know thy name: for thou hast not forsaken them that seek thee, O Lord. For the poor man shall not be forgotten to the end: the patience of the poor shall not perish for ever. Arise, O Lord, let not man be strengthened.”⁵

Is the Church speaking to God, to herself or to depressed people? Difficult to say, as it seems She’s speaking to the three together. She chants her trust in God, to reinsure herself, and give confidence to the poor people who are listening to Her. In a sentence, being in the meantime a wish and a prayer, the Church demands that any people who are under trial make an act of confidence into the Lord and trust Him to guide them through the difficulties.⁶

Saint John of the Cross, St Teresa and many others spoke about the night of the soul, facing loneliness in the darkness of the spiritual battle, but recommend in such moment to never withdraw our confidence in the grace of the Lord, our only true and sure guide.

It seems that this mass of Septuagesima Sunday is giving us a summary of our attitude for the next weeks. Starting with acknowledgment of our misery and distress in the introit, we placed our confidence into the Lord’s hand with the gradual, and we chant Him with thanksgiving in the communion antiphon:

“Let Your face shine upon Your servant; save me in Your kindness. O Lord, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon You.”⁷

The joy of the divine presence is comforting the sinner on his way of conversion, as it illuminated the exiled people in Babylon, hearing that the Lord has not abandoned them, and still care about them in this vale of tears where our dry bones are expecting the day of resurrection.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁵ Ps. IX, 10-11; 19-20. Gradual

⁶ Dom Ludovic Baron, *L’Expression du chant grégorien*, Vol. 1, Septuagesima Sunday

⁷ Ps XXX, 17-18. Communion