

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, 8th July 2018

“Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit shall be cut down, and shall be cast into the fire” (Mt 7:19). These words of Our Lord, which we have just heard from St Matthew’s Gospel, perhaps could seem a bit harsh to our ears, although they were somewhat softened by being sung in Latin. Our Lord here is in fact repeating word for word what St John the Baptist (whose birth we celebrated two Sundays ago) had spoken earlier on in St Matthew’s Gospel, just prior to Christ’s own Baptism. And if you thought Our Lord’s words in today’s Gospel were harsh, just listen to how St John introduced them in his preaching to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for Baptism: “Offspring of vipers, who has forewarned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of penance. And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham for our father. For I tell you that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham. For now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit shall be cut down, and shall be cast into the fire” (Mt 3:7-10).



The image of vipers fleeing from wrath, from the heat of fire, is reflected in the story of St Paul on Malta, where, after he “had gathered together a bundle of sticks, and had laid them on the fire, a viper coming out of the heat, fastened on his hand. [...] And he indeed shaking off the beast into the fire, suffered no harm” (Ac 28:3, 5). Our Lord in fact also uses the expression, “offspring of vipers”, in two

other passages in St Matthew's Gospel. The first is when he is again talking about trees and good fruit: "Either make the tree good and its fruit good; or make the tree evil, and its fruit evil. For by the fruit the tree is known. O generation of vipers, how can you speak good things, whereas you are evil?" (Mt 12:33-34). Then, towards the end of the Gospel, he addresses the scribes and Pharisees in no uncertain terms: "You serpents, generation of vipers, how will you flee from the judgment of hell?" (Mt 23:33). And here he actually outdoes St John the Baptist for apparent 'harshness': "the fire", into which the evil tree is thrown, is "hell" itself.

"You serpents" – Let us stop there and go back to the beginning, to the beginning of the Bible that is, and to the Garden of Eden. In the Garden, a serpent famously deceives the first woman, Eve, regarding the fruit of a certain tree: "And the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a pleasure for the eyes, and the tree was to be desired to give intelligence; and she took of its fruit, and ate, and gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Gn 3:6). If you get called "serpents", you are obviously in league with the serpent, the devil, and along that road which inevitably leads to the very depths of hell. Yet all this talk of trees and fruit again: surely the fruit that the serpent dared Eve to eat could not, despite appearances, possibly be "good"? Well, it led to death for the human race and indeed led to the threat of hell. The fruit (and, by the way, the idea of it being specifically an apple comes not from Scripture but from the Middle Ages: so you can continue calmly taking your one-a-day to keep the doctor away or giving one away to your teacher), the fruit (whatever it was) may have looked good to eat; looked pleasurable, but Eve should not have been deceived by mere appearances and so defy the divine ban.

It goes without saying, however, that all fruit is not evil: in fact Our Lord, the very one who forbade Adam and Eve to eat of the tree, offers himself as fruit. St Elisabeth, mother of John the Baptist, during the Virgin Mary's visit to her, the Visitation (celebrated last Monday, 2nd July, in the old calendar), exclaimed in those thoroughly familiar words of the Hail Mary: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Lk 1:42). Christ is the hidden "fruit" of the womb of Our Lady, the new Eve: the hidden fruit – not the forbidden fruit. And whereas our first parents brought about a curse: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee" (Gn 3:17-18), so Our Lady and her divine Child, the fruit of her womb, bring about blessing: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb". Notice, incidentally, how the book of Genesis characterised the cursed ground as producing "thorns and thistles", thus echoing that question of Christ in today's Gospel: "Do men gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles?" (Mt 7:16).

Travelling through Worcestershire and Herefordshire, while maybe spotting the odd thorn or thistle, one cannot help seeing fruit orchards. As in the Gospel: if any tree fails to produce good fruit, it faces getting the chop and bonfire treatment (cf. Mt 7:19). We too are, metaphorically speaking, fruit trees, with (as St John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees) the axe, or chainsaw (more in our case), laid at the roots (cf. Mt 3:10). Don't panic, though! Let us simply follow the Baptist's own advice: "Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of penance" (Mt 3:8). Let us be sorry then for our sins, and even free from sin; bringing forth the fruit of good works and holiness; remembering what St Paul said in today's Epistle (the same Paul who would almost have his hand bitten off by a Maltese viper): "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end life everlasting. For the wages of sin is death [the result, that is, of Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit]. But the grace of God, life everlasting, in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm 6:22-23), the fruit of the Virgin's womb.



And so let us conclude with the conclusion to the Salve Regina, the very prayer with which we will indeed conclude the whole of our prayer in common this afternoon: "*Et Iesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui, nobis post hoc exsilium ostende* (And after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus), *O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria*".