

Second Sunday of Advent, Little Malvern, 2018

Today's Epistle and Gospel each remind me of a particular image from art. In the Epistle to the Romans, we heard St Paul quoting from the prophet Isaiah: "There shall be a root of Jesse; and He that shall rise up to rule the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope" (Rm 15:12; cf. Is 11:10). In the former Benedictine Priory church at Abergavenny, Monmouthshire, you can admire a wooden sculpture of Jesse, father of King David, and "a root" sprouting out of him. It is especially finely craved and perhaps one of the finest medieval sculptures in the whole world. Originally a 'Tree of Jesse', it was evidently felled in the turmoil of the Reformation and left as a tree stump, you could say.



Despite all this, we still have the reclining figure of Jesse, who would have been at the base of the Tree, whose branches would have included various descendents of his, finally reaching an apex in the Virgin and Child. Such a tree, to all intents and purposes, would be a real Christmas tree, if ever there was one: kings and prophets being the baubles and Christ and Our Lady taking the place of the angel, star (or whatever it is that you have stuck on top of your tree). Christmas tree or not: the Jesse Tree is without any doubt a 'family tree'. Taking its starting point from Isaiah, chapter eleven, cited in today's Epistle, the "root of Jesse" can be seen here to grow into a tree, branching out to include some of those ancestors of Christ listed in the genealogies of St Matthew and St Luke.

The 'Tree of Jesse' may have gone at Abergavenny but the "root of Jesse" remains, and Jesse himself points to its fulfilment in that future son of David, the Messiah: "He that shall rise up to rule the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope" (Rm 15:12). Jesse and all the other ancestors prepared the ground, as it were, for the physical birth of Christ, who would rule not just the people of Israel, like King David, but all peoples. Yet this was not the only preparation that was needed: some moral and spiritual preparing had of course to be done. Enter St John the Baptist, whom Christ himself described as "more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: Behold I send my angel before Thy face, who shall prepare Thy way before Thee" (Mt 11:10; cf. Ml 3:1).

The Baptist prepares the way for the Messiah by improving the ways, the lives, of the people. I said at the beginning that the Epistle and Gospel reminded me of a particular image. Having already now looked at the “root [or Tree] of Jesse” in the Epistle, which image is conjured up by the Gospel? “It is written: Behold I send my angel”. During one church crawl round the Herefordshire countryside, I noticed at the village of Brockhampton a small icon of John Baptist, depicting the saint with a pair of wings. This was not the first time that I had seen him depicted like this, but I thought that it was quite an unusual thing to find in an English Arts and Crafts church: both icons and winged St John the Baptists belong very much to Eastern Christianity.



No doubt a Western Christian could be a bit taken aback by the wings and be tempted to think: they have obviously mistaken the Baptist for an angel! Hang on: but what did we read in the Gospel: “*Ecce ego mitto angelum meum* (Behold I send my angel)” (Mt 11:10). The Douay-Rheims version here faithfully follows, as would be expected, the Latin of the Vulgate: “angel” for “*angelum*”, which in turn, as would be expected again, faithfully follows the Greek, ἄγγελόν. This fact explains why Greek icons show St John the Baptist as an angel: because that is how the Lord himself describes him in the Gospel. But before you insist that he was definitely a man not an angel, it must be pointed out that ἄγγελόν simply means ‘messenger’: angels are by definition messengers, and John the Baptist was also a messenger, an “angel”, passing on the message of God in preparation for his Son’s coming.

Both the image of the “root of Jesse” and that of St John as an “angel” are themselves images taken from the Old Testament and explained in the pages of the New: St Paul quoting, as he does, the prophet Isaiah and our Lord the prophet Malachi, whose name actually means in Hebrew ‘my angel’; Malachi being another messenger of God. Moreover, both images are indeed images and as such should not be taken too literally: a root did not literally sprout from Jesse or wings from John the Baptist. No, and yet they express a deeper reality: Christ as being “risen again from the dead, of the seed of David” (2 Tm 2:8), as St Paul told Timothy in his second epistle; and that unique role of Christ’s precursor, the “angel [...] who shall prepare Thy way before Thee” (Mt 11:10).