

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Little Malvern, 27th January 2019

Two weeks ago, I received a parcel through the post from my aunt in Folkestone. When I opened it, I discovered a little book, *A. E. Horton. His Life and Autographs*, published by the Folkestone and District Local History Society, which reproduces the autograph album (with a short biography) of an uncle of my aunt's, and as such a great-uncle of mine. I was intrigued to find in Uncle Ernie's album some illustrations by a number of German soldiers, which was explained in the biography as the result of the time he spent as a nursing orderly at Sutton Veny Hospital Camp, Wiltshire, in 1916. Well over four hundred wounded German prisoners came to the Camp in that year.



I did not realise that the British would have cared for German soldiers in such a way during the Great War: I simply assumed that we would have been too busy shooting at them in the trenches, or even shooting our own for cowardice. When I read the Epistle for today to himself, just two days after the parcel arrived, those words of St Paul to the Romans seemed to resonate with me very clearly indeed: “if thy enemy be hungry, give him to eat: if he thirst, give him to drink” (Rm 12:20). These words are not St Paul's own, but are quoted by him from the book of Proverbs (25:21). He then continues with the quotation: “for doing this, thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head” (Pr 25:22). Now that sounds more like the sort of thing you do to an “enemy”!

And yet, as perhaps would be expected, this was probably not intended to be a nasty thing. The “coals of fire” are not made of the “fire” of burning wrath but of burning charity: such charity shown to the “enemy”, by feeding and watering him, should in turn hopefully ignite him with that same “fire”. A “fire” which reminds me, and maybe you also, of the prayer that the priest prays when he hands the thurible back to the server,

after he has incensed the altar during the Offertory at Mass: “May the Lord kindle in us the fire of his love and the flame of everlasting charity (*Accendat in nobis Dominus ignem sui amoris et flammam aeternae caritatis*). Amen”.

All of us need to be set on fire with that divine “love” and “charity”, though all too often we want to resort to an all too human revenge instead. Simply being nice to, let alone loving, your enemies seems to go completely against the grain; and you do not have to be in the middle of a war to have them! You might think to yourself: How can I possibly get my own back on my enemy, that person who has hurt me in some way? St Paul, however, to get back to today’s Epistle, tells us: “Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved” (Rm 12:19). How terrible, then, that “*la bella lingua* (the beautiful language)” of Italian has giving us that rather ugly word: ‘vendetta’. Taking revenge and pursuing vendettas should be absolutely none of our business.

It is ultimately for God to decide who to reward and who to punish; as St Paul goes on to declare, this time quoting from the book of Deuteronomy (32:35): “for it is written: Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord” (Rm 12:19). And even if “revenge” is his, the Lord is not doing any repaying as such just yet. Look at the life and death of the Son of God: he did not go around taking his “revenge” on people – quite the opposite – he went around curing people, including those whom the Jews would have generally classed as ‘enemies’. The centurion, in today’s Gospel, was part of that hated occupying force, the Romans, and yet Jesus healed his servant (cf. Mt 8:13).

At the very start of his ministry, Christ openly expressed his intention of offering repentance for sinners rather than of taking his revenge on them. When, in St Mark’s Gospel, he starts preaching, he announces that: “The time is accomplished, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe the gospel” (Mk 1:15). In the Gospel for this Sunday in the new calendar, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (which this year, being Year C, is following St Luke), there is that scene of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, which effectively inaugurates his ministry in St Luke’s Gospel. Having been handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he reads the following: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Wherefore he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the contrite of heart, to preach deliverance to the captives, and sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19). And he stops there.

By rights this section of Isaiah, chapter sixty-one that is, should not stop here at all, since it would mean stopping right in the middle of a sentence! Jesus, however, finishes reading at “to preach the acceptable year of the Lord”, but should really have gone on to read: “and the day of vengeance of our God” (Is 61:2). He misses out “the day of vengeance”, and deliberately of course, because that “day” had not yet come. He had come instead to preach “the acceptable year of the Lord”; a whole year of divine favour rather than a brief day of divine wrath. And he will, in the course of his ministry, truly “preach” this message. It is indeed a message that everyone needs constantly to be reminded of; because, as I pointed out, it goes completely against the grain. Two chapters later in St Luke’s Gospel, Christ will declare to “the company of his disciples, and a very great multitude of people” (Lk 6:17): “I say to you that hear: Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you” (Lk 6:27).