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THE CHURCH OF THE ADVENT, BOSTON

In the library in my house in France, I have a fascinating book by Neil MacGregor, once upon a time the Director of London's National Gallery. It is called *A History of the World in a Hundred Objects,* and it was published soon after the BBC had broadcast twenty glorious mini-lectures given by MacGregor on the radio in 2010. His sensitive and discriminating choice of iconic objects is matched in the book by a concise, eloquent and - above all - gently informative text to go with each illustration. Others have subsequently borrowed his format with mixed results – not everyone has his gift for making knowledge so readily accessible.

Were I to attempt the choice of an object with which to encapsulate today's commemoration of the Royal Martyr, I might have chosen the King's waistcoat or over-shirt, preserved in the Museum of London, just around the corner from St Bartholomew the Great, the church in Smithfield where I assist in retirement. It is hugely evocative and we hear the royal martyr speak as we view it:

> "*Let me have a shirt on more than ordinary by reason the season is so sharp as probably may make mee shake, which some Observors will imagin' proceeds from fear. I will have no such Imputation, I fear not death!*"

A good number of well-documented relics of the King survive and, notably, Lambeth Palace preserves a fine pair of gloves given by the King to Bishop Juxon who attended him at his execution. When the King's grave was opened in 1813, his body was found to be incorrupt and smelling of roses. On the very day of his beheading, many in the silent crowd of onlookers took away bloodstained handkerchiefs and torn cloths, relics with which to remember the martyred king. Many of these have survived to this day. Had I made this choice we might have gone on to review the role played by relics in the devotional life of the Church today.

For my purposes on this occasion I would rather choose a picture. A picture in the Royal Collection which is currently to be found in the King's Dressing Room in the State Apartments of Windsor Castle. Charles I was described by no less an authority than the painter and diplomat Peter-Paul Rubens as "*the greatest amateur of paintings among the princes of the world*". His discerning taste propelled the Royal collection to new heights with the inclusion of works by such great painters as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Titian, Correggio and Tintoretto. These were among the spectacular purchases he made in Italy and his choice of great Renaissance works proved to be the first highpoint in the history of the Collection.

By acquiring *The Triumphs of Caesar* by Andrea Mantegna and *Raphael's Acts of the Apostles* tapestry cartoons, two of the most important series of art works ever purchased by a European monarch, Charles also developed a reputation for connoisseurship and discrimination. His refined taste led him to become a discerning patron of the contemporary arts and so attracted to England such distinguished painters as Van Dyck and Rubens – who painted the glorious ceiling of the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, seen for the last time by the King just before he stepped through a window onto the scaffold.

Earlier this month I visited London's newly refurbished and rehung National Portrait Gallery, with the preparation of this sermon in mind, to see what they had done with their rather dull Daniel Mytens portrait of the King. I was interested to find it hanging between Van Dyck's magisterial portraits of Archbishop William Laud and Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Stafford, both of whom had been sent to the scaffold by the King after intense pressure from Parliament. The implication of the display was – to quote St Theresa of Avila - "*if you treat your friends like this it is no wonder you haven't got many*." As we all know from the famous judgement of Mandell Crieghton, Bishop of London from 1897-1901, "*had Charles been willing to abandon the Church and give up episcopacy, he might have saved his throne and his life*." It is that simple. Whatever our view of Charles as a monarch may be, whatever our attitude to his apparent betrayal of his closest supporters. He knew that refusal of conviction yields to deceit. Deceit lacks beauty. Adherence to one's conviction, in the present however difficult, yields immense beauty in the future. This was true for the Church during the English Civil War, and surely true for Christ's Kingdom throughout the ages.

The Royal picture I have chosen as my object of significance today is not a portrait. It is a small devotional image of the Virgin and Child, only 22" x 16", painted by the Florentine mannerist, Andrea del Sarto, in the late 1520s, towards the end of his all-too-short life. It is one of four almost identical surviving versions of the same composition painted by the master and his assistants at roughly the same time. From the scale it would seem that painting was intended for a domestic setting and it shows the Blessed Virgin doing something that I have never before seen her do in a painting. She is holding open Jesus's lower lip, gently opening his mouth and checking for the first signs of teeth. It seems to me that in that little touch, that intimate contact between mother and baby, the divine mystery strikes her and us. The mystery of the Incarnation is brought home – literally home – to us: the little boy she cradles, with dribble on his chin, is the Son of God.

I hazard the view that the King and his family were particularly fond of this tender image which originally hung in Queen Henrietta Maria's apartments in Somerset House. There is some evidence to back up my conjecture. The del Sarto acquired by Charles I disappeared after his execution – sold off, as were so many pictures from his collection, at the great Commonwealth Sale in 1649. It was bought for £55 for one Luis de Haro, the principal minister of Philip IV of Spain, but thereafter history lost track of it for 350 years. However, at the Restoration, Charles II, busied himself buying back pictures as far as was possible, trying to re-assemble his father's collection. A second version of the del Sarto Virgin and Child, came up for sale, undoubtedly painted by the hand of the master. Recognising it as a favourite image of his parents and perhaps taking it for the one they had owned when he was a child, Charles bought it. This is the version in Windsor Castle today – it is not actually the one owned by Charles I but, perhaps, its prototype. There is an interesting coda to the story. In the late 1960s the very picture owned by Charles I surfaced in a private collection here in the United States. It was recognised, cleaned and restored and in 2001 placed on exhibition in the Courtauld Galleries in Somerset House. Known as the *Botti Madonna* after its earliest known owner, the Florentine Marchese Botti, it remained on public view until 2003, close to where Charles and Henrietta Maria would have seen it and loved it.

I think it is not too far-fetched to find a parable here. The Church of England in which Charles I was raised had begun to rediscover the Blessed Virgin Mary. The theologians and spiritual writers we know as the Caroline Divines, together with their late Elizabethan and Jacobean teachers, had immersed themselves afresh in the writings of the Early Fathers and discovered there a rich treasury of sound teaching concerning the role of Mary in the economy of salvation. Lancelot Andrewes, who chaired the board of translators which produced the Authorised Version of the Bible in 1611, laced his *Preces Privatae* – his personal collection of prayers - with invocations to our Lady taken from the Byzantine tradition: "*Commemorating the all-holy, immaculate, more than blessed Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints . . .*" While Charles and his family were enriching their devotional life with paintings like the del Sarto Virgin and Child, sermons preached at Christmas, on the feast of the Purification, and on Lady Day itself by some of the great preachers of the day began to address Mary as *Our Lady*, as *Mother of God*, as *Ever-Virgin*, as *the Second Eve* and even as *Star of the Sea*. Mark Frank, perhaps the most extreme of all these preachers, began a Christmas sermon in 1642 with these wonderful words*:*

> *"The Virgin Mother, the Eternal Son. The most blessed among women, the fairest of the sons of men. The woman clothed with the sun: the son compassed with a woman. She the gate of heaven: he the King of Glory who came forth. She the mother of the everlasting God: he God without a mother; God blessed for evermore. Great persons as ever met upon a day."*

Poets too, notably John Donne and George Herbert, exhibited a tender love for Our Lady and an occasional gentle hint as to the efficacy of her prayers. Donne's little poem comes to mind:

"*For that fair blessèd mother-maid,*
Whose flesh redeemed us; that she-cherubin,
Which unlocked Paradise, And made
One claim for innocence, and disseizèd sin,
Whose womb was a strange heaven, for there
God clothed himself, and grew,
Our zealous thanks we pour. As her deeds were
Our helps, so are her prayers; nor can she sue
In vain, who hath such titles unto you."

William Laud, when Archbishop of Canterbury, had encouraged the University authorities at Oxford to erect a crowned statue of the Virgin above the new porch added to the University Church in 1637. When Laud went to the scaffold in 1645, the erection of the Oxford statue was one of the charges laid against him. As we recall today, Charles himself stepped onto a scaffold, four years after Laud's death and eight years after Lord Stafford's - within months the del Sarto painting was sold and disappeared abroad.

Abroad, too, went many of the younger generation of Caroline divines, Royal Chaplains to minister to the Royal family in exile, to keep alive in them the traditions and spirituality of the Church of England – Anglican Patrimony. At home the Prayer Book services were proscribed, a new round of iconoclasm started – worse, far worse than that "stripping of the altars" which had taken place under Edward VI – and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was rigorously suppressed within the Presbyterian polity of the Interregnum religious scene. But with the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, King and clergy came back. A reaction to the joyless, puritanism and Calvinist determinism of the Commonwealth led to a new confidence in the spirituality and liturgical inheritance of the Church of England and this was reflected to a certain extent in the revised and expanded Book of Common Prayer issued in 1662. Christmas and the Marian feasts were reinstated, and King Charles II bought back what he perhaps thought was his mother and father's del Sarto never again to leave the Royal Collection.

So here we have this little picture, painted for private devotion by an Italian renaissance master, a homely but eloquent proclamation of the great mystery of the Word made Flesh, much loved by a faithful husband and wife whose marriage bridged two great ecclesial traditions, lost and then found again in the political and religious upheavals of a tumultuous time. In its story we glimpse a little of our precious catholic heritage in our beleaguered Anglican Communion, God is glorified, and his Holy Mother honoured. So be it, Lord. Amen.

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Chaplain to Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II
January 27th 2024