HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 2 YEAR A

15 JANUARY 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

We come today to the beginning of the ‘ordinary’ Sundays of the year, in the first year of the annual cycles, the year of St Matthew. But in fact we will not start readings from St Matthew till next week, when we will hear his account of the call of the first disciples.

Today we have St John and the theme seems to be in echo of Epiphany, centring on the baptism of Jesus and the witness to him of St John the Baptist. We hear St John describing Jesus as the ‘lamb of God’, as ‘the one I spoke of’, ‘a man coming after me, a man who ranks before me because he existed before me’, the one upon whom the Spirit came down at his baptism, the one who baptises in the Holy Spirit and then finally ‘the Chosen One of God’.

All of this is prefaced by John’s one command ‘Look’: in other words, look at, behold, see, the one who is being revealed to you, who is being manifested among you. John was pointing bystanders, his own followers, to Jesus, physically visible in front of them, because as the gospel passage says ‘Jesus was coming towards him’ and those to whom he pointed Jesus out, were about to become followers, disciples and apostles of Jesus. They beheld him. However, to understand John the Baptist’s meaning, to understand the meaning of the phrases ‘lamb of God’ and ‘Chosen One of God’ they needed something a good deal more than a physical act of sight; many might have looked but shrugged in incomprehension at the phrases. To understand John’s words they need more than sight, a gift of insight and of faith.

For us of course as for nearly all the believers who have gone before us since the time of the first disciples that finger of St John the Baptist pointing, has not been to a visible figure at all, but has been to the insight and to the faith that made it in the first place something more than just a physical pointing out. Already in the first century the first letter of St Peter says (1:8) ‘you never saw him, yet you love him, and still without seeing him you believe in him and so are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described’. It seems a very surprising and rather a puzzling thing to say, very hard to use to convince those (so many of them in our own day) who are sceptical or critical, but nonetheless it is a definite and recognisable experience: you did not see him, yet you believe in him and indeed you love him. It is something very mysterious that we are able to know what this means, to believe and to love him. We are able, as it were, to follow St John the Baptist’s finger pointing him out to us. None of this is to say that we are as perfect in faith and in love as we would like to be. But as it is put in the papal encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, begun by Pope Benedict and concluded by Pope Francis, ‘Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey’ (section 57).

But if this Epiphany is a revelation, a manifestation ‘of’ something, of Christ even to us, it is also a revelation and a manifestation ‘for’ something, for a calling and a mission, even for *our* calling and mission.

In the first reading from Isaiah, a prophecy which comes from the mid 6th century BC, from the time of the exile in Babylon, a time of great suffering and apparent destruction, we hear in the personification of Israel as the servant of the Lord, of a hope for restoration and for the bringing back of the survivors of exile, a light to the nations and a salvation reaching to the ends of the earth. In a time of dire distress, it is a generous prayer for God’s light to shine on all the peoples. In the responsorial psalm the people of God are asked not for sacrifices and offerings, but for an open and attentive ear, to do God’s will. In the second reading, from the opening words of St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians the people of God are greeted as the church of God in Corinth, the holy people of Jesus Christ, who are called to take their place among all the saints who pray to our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Gospel, the lamb of God is the one slain in order to take away the sins of the world, the one who baptises in the Holy Spirit.

This is a call which comes to each one of us in a very personal and particular way. It takes account of very different people, personality, situation in life, as a glance even around this small assembly suggests. But the revelation is of a call and a mission to be a people of God. We have sins of course, but there has been a sacrifice for their forgiveness. There are many difficulties and reversals on every side, and indeed we seem almost to be set at naught, but we are beckoned into a unity and peace, in order as the new people of God to bring light to a strife torn and divided world. It would be a false humility not to see that, despite our small prayer and meagre charity, we have nonetheless received a call and have been given a mission by God regarding the salvation of the world. ‘You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings, but an open ear. You do not ask for holocaust and victim. Instead here am I’. Those simple words from today’s psalm ‘here am I’ take no account of sinfulness and weakness, incapacity and inadequacy, strongly though at times we may feel all of these. ‘Here am I: they are words God can take and use powerfully to reveal and manifest the wonders of his Epiphany, which one day truly we will joyfully see and know.