

Sermons for Saints' Days and Holidays. No. 2, the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman's sermon emphasizes the importance of the Annunciation and Apostolic succession in preserving the true doctrine of the Incarnation against heretical teachings.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, John 15:16, 1 Corinthians 15:14, Galatians 1:8, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 2:2, Titus 1:9, 1 John 4:1, Jude 1:3

Topics: "Apostolic Succession", "Incarnation Of Christ"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of upholding the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, emphasizing the foundational belief in the Incarnation of our Lord and Savior as essential for our faith and salvation. He highlights the Apostolic succession as a divine guard appointed by God to preserve the integrity of Apostolic doctrine, protecting against heresies and false teachings. Newman explains how the Bishops and Pastors in the Church were chosen as apostolical guardians of the true faith, acting as a safeguard against doctrinal corruptions and ensuring the continuity of sound doctrine through the centuries.

Transcript

"Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed."--Galatians i. 8.

THIS day, though named from the Blessed Virgin, is one of the greatest festivals of our Saviour. And, therefore, in former times the Church of England reckoned it the beginning of her year; thereby especially giving intimation, that she would have the whole year dedicated to JESUS CHRIST. For this day, with which she began it, marks the time of His gracious incarnation; upon which all that we have or hope, both in Heaven and in earth, entirely depends. For, as St. Paul argues concerning another link in the chain of GOD'S mysterious mercy, If Christ were not truly made man, then He did not truly die for our sins: if He did not, then was He not raised again: and "if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins." Such was the adorable will of GOD Almighty, in His counsels for redeeming lost mankind. There was to be no communion between GOD and man, except through the everlasting SON, Himself both GOD and man. This is the foundation laid from the beginning, besides which no man can lay any other. Men may think little of it, but the evil spirits know it well; and accordingly, they have busied themselves from the beginning in nothing so much as in perplexing the minds of the unwary with regard to the incarnation of our LORD and SAVIOUR, and our communion with GOD through him. Church history is little else than a

record on the one hand, of their unceasing endeavours to corrupt the Faith on these two points; on the other of His watchful Providence, meeting and baffling them, in every age, by ways of His own, prepared also from the beginning, for their confusion, and our trial.

One of the very chiefest of these precautions was His appointing persons in his Church to watch the treasure of Divine Truth, to try and assay, by comparison with it, whatever doctrines from time to time became current, and to give notice, with all authority, wherever they found GOD'S mark wanting. To mention no other places; our Lord himself, in the text which I considered on St. Matthias' day, expresses himself in this manner. "I ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."

The Apostles were to take precautions, not only that their ministry might be fruitful for the time, but also that it might flourish and abound for ever. Those who work under their commission, may in virtue of this promise expect more abiding results from their labours, than any, however zealous, who may venture to take this honour to themselves. Not to forfeit this privilege, the holy Apostles instituted a regular custom, according to which, in all future times the faithful might be warned against heretical doctrines.

When any new point arose, regarding which the judgment of the Church was doubtful, reference was made to the chief pastors or Bishops, solemnly assembled to consider the subject; and they having thoroughly examined it, proclaimed an anathema, i. e. a sentence of excommunication, against the teachers and maintainers of dangerous error. For example; the very first controversy which arose in the Church related to the question whether the whole law of Moses ought to be observed as a condition of the Christian covenant.

It was settled by the Apostles' meeting at Jerusalem, as you read in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts. And, being settled, whoever contradicted it, whoever added either Moses' law or any thing else to the terms of salvation by Christ, and thereby began to preach a new Gospel, other than that received at first, you hear in the text what St. Paul says of him. "Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed:" let him be anathema, cut off from the communion of Christian people; not allowed to pray, or receive the sacrament, in the assemblies of Christian men.

Let him be, to those who obey CHRIST, as a heathen man and a Publican." Thus speaks the Apostle of those who should be so presumptuous as to teach the Jewish fable of the necessity of circumcision, after the decision of the Holy Spirit by Apostolical Church had been published. For it was published, with the utmost care, by letters and messengers sent to all the Churches; and being so, could not be disobeyed without wilful arrogance and irreverence. Thus St. Paul and the rest of the Apostles made known to the Church in all ages their right, and the right of the Bishops, their successors, to mark out such heretics as might arise from time to time, and put the faithful on their guard against them. And thus quite down from the time of our LORD, the Apostolical succession of pastors has continued, as a divinely-appointed guard, meant to secure the integrity of Apostolical doctrine.

Let us, as on this day we are bound, consider more especially what we owe to that holy succession, in respect of that on which, as Christians, our all, as we cannot but know, depends: I mean the true doctrine of the Incarnation of our LORD and SAVIOUR. It may be positively said, that under Providence we owe our inheritance of this saving doctrine to the chain of rightly-ordained Bishops, connecting our times with the time of its first promulgation. This will be more clearly seen, if the two following statements are

considered; neither of which can be reasonably doubted by any one who has looked much into Church history.

1. In ancient times the system of Apostolical, i.e. of episcopal anathemas, was the Church's main safeguard against the misinterpretations of Scripture, which from time to time threatened to deprive her children of their faith in GOD the SON, made man for our salvation.

2. Wheresoever in modern times the Apostolical succession has been given up, there the true doctrine of our LORD'S incarnation has been often corrupted, always in jeopardy.

These propositions are of course too large to be fully made out in the narrow limits of a sermon. But a few instances of each will show what is meant, and will serve to draw serious minds to reverential thought on the whole subject.

I. Even during the Apostolic age, there were many, who under pretence of purer doctrine, refused to confess "JESUS CHRIST come in the flesh." This we know from the later books of the New Testament; especially from the writings of St. John. And by the records of the two next generations we learn that the corruptions were of two kinds, apparently opposite. Some, out of pretended reverence for our LORD'S Divine nature, refused to own Him, made very man for us. They would have it, that His blessed body was no more than a dream or vision, and all that He did here, a scene as it were enacted by the will of the Almighty to make an impression on our minds. Others, on the contrary, denied His divine being, pretending, no doubt, extraordinary reverence towards GOD the Father Almighty, they would not hear the Gospel doctrine that he who is One with the FATHER, had vouchsafed to become one of us. They would have it that the crucified Jesus was either a mere human saint, or at best a sort of good angel. Against both these blasphemous errors St. John himself had given warning, pronouncing as it were the Church's anathema beforehand. "There are many deceivers entered into the world, who confess not JESUS CHRIST come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an anti-Christ. . . . Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of CHRIST, hath not GOD. He that abideth in the doctrine CHRIST, he hath both the FATHER AND THE SON. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him GOD speed. For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." However, in the next generation after St. John, this evil leaven was still found working in the Church, and the false teachers of both sorts still had the boldness to please Scripture, which somehow they contrived to wrest and pervert in their own way. How were they to be answered? How was it to be made manifest that their interpretation of Scripture was wrong? It was done by appealing to that interpretation, which had the warrant of the Apostles themselves. How was that interpretation known? By its preservation in the several Churches which had been founded by the Apostles,--Rome, Corinth, Jerusalem, and the rest. How had the right interpretation of Scripture been preserved in each of those places? By the succession of Bishops, each in turn handing over to the Bishop that followed him what he had himself learned of his predecessors. The defenders of Evangelical truth reasoned as follows:--

"The tradition of the Apostles, made known in all the world, may be clearly discerned in every Church, by those who are willing to behold things as they are; nay, and we are able to enumerate those whom the Apostles ordained to be Bishops in the several Churches, along with their successors, even down to our time, none of whom ever taught or imagined any such doctrine as the heretics, in their frenzy, maintain. If such interpretations had been known to the Apostles, in the manner of hidden mysteries, reserved to be taught apart to the most perfect, surely, of all others, they to whom the Churches themselves were committed would have had these mysteries committed to them also. For it was the Apostles' wish to

have their successors, and those entrusted to bear sway in their stead, complete and unblameable in every thing; whose correct demeanour was sure to be the Church's blessing; their fall, her extreme calamity. It were too long, however, at present to enumerate the chains of Bishops in all the Churches. Look at one of the greatest and ancientest, well known to all, the Church founded and established at Rome, by two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul. What tradition she received from the Apostles, and what faith, to be preached to all men, we are able to ascertain; the same having come down to us by the unbroken series and succession of her Bishops. And thus we confound all those who in any way draw wrong conclusions, through self-complacency, or vain glory, or blindness of heart and evil prejudice. For to this Church of Rome, because of the eminent dignity" (of that city), "it cannot be but that other Churches resort, I mean believers, from every quarter; and in the same Church, among those so resorting, the tradition of the Apostles has been preserved entire." Thus speaks the holy Bishop and martyr Irenaeus, who lived within twenty years of St. John himself; and, to make good his words, he proceeds to reckon up the Bishops of Rome, from the first, appointed by the two great Apostles, to the time of his writings--twelve in number. "By this order and succession," says Irenaeus, "the tradition inherited by the Church from the Apostles, and the substance of their preaching, has come down safe to our times."

Thus wrote Irenaeus, living in Gaul. And in like manner, not long after him, Tertullian, writing against the same heretics in Africa, and defending that doctrine of our LORD'S true Incarnation, which is the very life of the world:-- "The heretics," says he, "themselves plead Scripture. How are we to know whether their's is the true sense or our's? The natural way is to look and see whether either of the two can be traced back to the time of the Apostles. What CHRIST revealed to them they preached; what they preached, must be known by the testimony of those Churches which they themselves founded. If there be any heresies claiming Apostolical antiquity, let them give account of the first beginning of their Churches; let them unfold the roll of their Bishops, so continued by succession from the beginning, as that their first Bishop shall have received ordination from some Apostle or disciples of the Apostles; such a disciple, I mean, as went out from them. For thus do the Churches which are truly Apostolical make out, as it were, their genealogical tables: the Church of Smyrna vouching as her first Prelate Polycarp, there established by St. John; the Church of Rome, Clement, in like manner, ordained by St. Peter; and the other Churches no less have each some person to name, fixed by the Apostles, as Bishops, in each respectively; through whom each derives the seed of Apostolical communion." Now, as Tertullian goes on to argue, "this unbroken connexion with the Apostles was a strong pledge of their inheriting sound Apostolical doctrine, too, except it could be proved their doctrine had varied at any time. For, as the Apostles must have agreed with each other in their teaching, so neither could Apostolical men have put forth doctrines contrary to the Apostles; except that they were such as had revolted from the Apostles, and might be detected by the diversity of their doctrine." And this would hold in each following age, till some actual variation took place. And if it held in respect of any one Church, how much more in respect of the combined evidence of the independent Churches in all parts of the world, each producing their several lines of succession, terminating in several Apostles or Apostolical men, and each agreeing (for all material points) in the same traditionary doctrine and the interpretation of the Scriptures! For instance, when on some occasion, as the same Tertullian relates, the Churches of Rome and Africa "interchanged the watchword," or, as we might say, "compared notes;" what an encouragement and confirmation must it not have proved to both, to find themselves mutually agreed, without previous concert, in their views of Scripture truth, and of the system established by the Apostles.

By such arguments in the first age were the enemies of Christ's Incarnation put to silence. It is plain, so far, how well the Episcopal succession answered the purpose assigned to it by our LORD, of providing

that the fruit of Apostolical teaching should remain; and how vigorously the Church's anathema, first pronounced by St. John, was followed up, to the confusion of those who "abode not in the doctrine of CHRIST."

Still more remarkable to the same purpose are the examples of the following age. There, too, we find the Apostolical succession the main out-work of Apostolical doctrine; the truth of CHRIST'S Incarnation defended, not as in the former age by single writers appealing to the long lines of Bishops who had taught it, but by the Bishops of the Church themselves, synodically met to pass sentence on the questionable teaching of some of their colleagues. Being so met, they represented not simply the judgment of the contemporary Churches, but also that of each former generation of Christians, on the great mystery in dispute. Each Bishop taking part in a synodical decision on those cardinal points of the faith, was understood as avouching, besides his own opinion, the traditionary interpretation likewise which his Church had inherited from her first founder. A very little thought will show how greatly this adds to the support furnished by such meetings to orthodox and saving truth. A convention of learned theologians agreeing in their views of Scripture, would, no doubt, carry great authority. A council of Bishops, in the third century, was such a convention, and a great deal more: it was a collection of harmonious independent testimonies to the way in which the writers of Scripture had originally intended their writings to be understood.

The advantage of so meeting and comparing their respective traditions, was particularly evident in those cases in which any member of their own sacred order had countenanced, or seemed to countenance, heretical opinions. For instances of the kind occur in the age now under consideration; the one displaying in a peculiar way the scrupulous watchfulness of the early Church: the other, her uncompromising firmness;—both in vindication of the pure Gospel of GOD manifest in the flesh.

The first is the case of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, one of the most famous Prelates of his time. The heresy of Sabellius had sprung up in his province, which, under pretence of magnifying our blessed LORD, confounded His Person with that of the Almighty FATHER, and so in fact denied the whole economy of Salvation: maintaining that the FATHER himself was incarnate; that He appeared on earth as the SON, and suffered on the cross for us. Refuting these, the holy Bishop had argued from those expressions of Scripture which represent our LORD in his human nature, as the work or creature of GOD the FATHER.

"The Incarnate SON," said he, "is not the same with the FATHER, as the tree is not the same with the husbandman, nor the ship with the builder." Expression surely justifiable enough, since what they affirm is found almost word for word in our LORD'S own discourses. "I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Husbandman." However, the expressions were misunderstood, although from St. Dionysius' own report it should seem that he had carefully guarded them by the context; it was generally reported that he had used language derogatory of the Divine honour of our LORD.

A synod met at Rome to examine the matter, on behalf of which the then Bishop of Rome, also named Dionysius, wrote to the Bishop of Alexandria, requesting an explanation; which he gave to the full satisfaction of the whole Church; summing up his doctrine in these remarkable words: "Of the names used by me to express the Divine Persons, there is none which can be separated or divided from the other to which it is related. Thus, suppose I speak of the FATHER; before I add the term 'SON,' I have implied His existence, by using the term 'FATHER.' I add the term SON; though I had not mentioned the FATHER, assuredly the idea of Him would have been comprised in that of the SON: I join to these the

Â'HOLY GHOST,Â' but at the same time I annex the thought of the fountain from whom and the channel by whom He proceeds;" calling him, as it seems, the SPIRIT of the FATHER and the SON.

"Thus, on the one hand, we do as it were expand the UNITY, without division, into a TRINITY of Persons; on the other hand, we gather the TRINITY, without diminution, into an UNITY of substance." This noble confession of a perfect faith we owe to the friendly remonstrance of the assembled Bishops; and surely the advantage is great, of such a standing guard, in enabling the Church not only to recognize and repel her enemies, but also to know for certain those friends about whom otherwise she might stand in doubt.

If, when the excellent Bishop Taylor published his Â'Liberty of Propheying,Â' there had been a council of primitive Bishops at hand, to warn him authoritatively of the evil consequences which heretics would afterwards draw from some of his positions, the Church would, in all probability, have been a gainer in two ways: first, what he had there put incautiously would have been corrected, and the sting taken out: and next, we might so much the more unreservedly use his authority on other points.

But to proceed with the third century:Â--Very soon after this friendly debate with Dionysius, both he, and the Bishops who had remonstrated with him, and indeed the great body of the Orthodox Prelacy, were called on to maintain the truth of our LORDÂ'S incarnation in another case, in which all remonstrance had failed. This was the case of Paul of Samosata, himself also Bishop and Pastor of one of the most renowned sees, Antioch; the only Church which at that time could compare in dignity with Rome and Alexandria.

To expose the errors of so high a functionary, to call him to account, and finally, he continuing obstinate, to depose him, was the work of no mean authority; especially as he had the support of a strong political party, and used many arts which in all times have been found popular and effective. It appears by the report of the synod of Bishops assembled to inquire into his cause, that he delighted to resemble men of much secular business; to have people pressing on him; to be reading letters and dictating answers as he went along the public street.

Again, in his preaching, he constantly aimed at making a show of ingenuity, and producing a splendid effect for the time. His action was violent and showy, and he encouraged in the very Church, the rude expressions of applause, shaking of handkerchiefs, and the like, which were practised in the theatres. The fathers, and their interpretations of Scripture, he took all opportunities of disparaging, praising himself at their expense, more like one lecturing, or telling fortunes for hire, than like a genuine Christian Bishop.

It is clear at once, what view such a person would be likely to take of the high and mysterious doctrines of our religion. It is no matter of surprise to find him maintaining, in opposition to our LORDÂ'S own words, that CHRIST was from beneath, and not from above; that he was merely a human Prophet, not the SON of GOD come down from Heaven; that the wisdom of the Almighty dwelt in Him as it had dwelt in former Prophets, only in more abundant measure. In short, he held the same doctrine as those who now call themselves Unitarians.

And there is good reason to think, that he was favoured and protected by the ruling power in the state. Zenobia, who at that time exercised imperial sway in Syria with the title of Queen of the East, was strongly addicted to a kind of deistical Judaism, the same in substance with his Unitarian opinions. These few particulars may give some idea of the peril in which the orthodox faith and true Church lay then at Antioch. But even under the most untoward circumstances, the Bishops of the neighbouring sees assembled; and their interference, by the blessing of GOD, was effectual in preserving their charge from apostasy.

It is worth observing how well their proceedings answer to the line marked out in such cases by our LORD himself, in His charter of Church censures. First, then send Paul a brotherly expostulation, telling him his fault between them and him alone. The first sentence of this letter is much to be noticed, not only for its calm and gentle tone, but also, for its very distinct reference to the succession of doctrine from the Apostles as a test of truth. "Health in CHRIST:--We have just now, by discourse with each other, satisfied ourselves of our mutual faith.

Now that every one's mind may be clearly disclosed, and all disputed question more completely set at rest, we have thought good hereby to set forth in writing the faith which we have received from the beginning, and hold fast, handed down as it is and safely guarded in the Catholic and holy Church, preached even to this day, through succession by the blessed Apostles, those who were even eye-witnesses and ministers of the word; this faith we have decreed to set forth out of the Law and the Prophets, and the New Testament."

Then having gone through a large body of Scripture evidence for the most High Godhead of our LORD and SAVIOUR, they conclude:-- "These things, a few out of very many, we have set down, desiring to know whether you think and teach as we do, and requesting you to signify to us your approbation or disapprobation of what we have written." This epistle was followed up by various conferences: but Paul yet refusing to be reclaimed, the Bishops of Syria went to act upon the remaining part of our SAVIOUR'S enactment in such cases: they assembled, to the number of seventy or eighty, and called on him to "hear the Church:" which, when he refused, they formally deposed him, and separated him from the body of Christian people, pronouncing on him the following sentence:-- "Him, thus setting himself against GOD, and refusing to give way, we have been compelled to excommunicate, and his room to set another as Bishop over this Catholic Church; by the providence of GOD, as we believe."

This they made known to the Bishops of Rome and Alexandria, and all the world over, that they, acquiescing in the sentence pronounced, might lose no time in writing to the new Bishop of Antioch letters of communion and acknowledgment, as the manner of the churches then was; directing their letter, "To the Bishops of Rome and Alexandria, and all our fellow servants throughout the world, whether Bishops, Priests, or Deacons, and to the whole Catholic Church under Heaven." By the co-operation of those distant Bishops, the sentence was finally and effectually confirmed: the Church of Antioch delivered from her unfaithful shepherd, and the verity of our LORD'S Divine Nature passed on, as a precious deposit, to other councils and other times.

These few brief examples,--not, it will be observed, standing apart, but taken as what they truly are, specimens of a great and general system, continually in action throughout the Christian world;--these few examples may serve to show how close a connexion naturally subsists between sound doctrine and apostolical succession in the ministry. We have seen that the one, in those primitive ages, was constantly appealed to as no slight guarantee for the other. It could not well be otherwise, as long as the successors of the Apostles did their duty, originally in ordaining none but orthodox men, and afterwards in watching and censuring (if need were) the most exalted even of their own colleagues, on sufficient proof of defection on their part.

Two facts are quite indisputable: the first, that in those ages the Bishops and Pastors were considered as the chosen apostolical guardians of the truth faith; the other, that they really acted as such. Does not the conclusion irresistably follow, that such Providence intended them to be? And can any one, knowing these circumstances, read the peculiarly significant promises at sundry times addressed by our LORD to His

Apostles, and not perceive in the Episcopal succession the appropriate fulfilment of those promises? For instance, "I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain." "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." "Upon this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

We have then from Scripture, the consolation of believing, that as long as we reverence and uphold the Apostolical ministry, we are in our line and measure "labouring together" with GOD himself. We are so far doing our humble part in that system which the all-wise Redeemer has ordained to be the human, visible, secondary instrument of guarding and propagating those truths, on which our communion with Him depends.

This will be seen yet more clearly, on proceeding to examine the doctrinal results, such as they appear on the whole in those Churches, which from error or necessity have parted with the Apostolical succession. This must be attempted on some future occasion.

For the present, reverting to that ineffable mystery, from which on this day especially all our devout thoughts should begin, and in which they should end, I would only ask one question. What will be the feelings of a Christian, particularly of a Christian pastor, should he find hereafter that in slighting or discouraging Apostolical claims and views, (be the temptation what it may) he has really been helping the evil spirit to unsettle men's faith in THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD?

OXFORD,

The Feast of the Purification.

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