

present in the United States, but it is a pity that the honest intentions of a straightforward missal designed for use today should be betrayed by these self-consciously archaic and uncertain illustrations.



THE CHRIST CHILD

Sermon VII of St Leo the Great on the Epiphany

(P.L. 54, 752)

IT is very useful for us, dearly beloved, to remind ourselves of the deeds performed by the Saviour of mankind, provided that we undertake to imitate in action what we venerate in faith. There are lessons to be learned as well as wonders of grace to be admired in the unfolding of the sacred mysteries of Christ, and while we acknowledge him in a spirit of faith we should also be following him in the pattern of our behaviour. Even the small beginnings from which the Son of God started, when he was born of his virgin mother, can instruct us how to make progress in piety. Both human littleness and divine greatness are there to be perceived by upright minds, combined in one and the same person. The cradle proves him an infant, yet heaven and heavenly beings call him their maker; he has a child's tiny body, and he is lord and ruler of the world; no boundaries can fence him in, but he is held there to his mother's bosom. This is how our wounds are healed, this is how we are raised up from our fall; for without this bringing together in one of such great disparities, mankind could never have been reconciled to God.

Now these remedies of ours have set us a law of life, and we are given a standard of conduct by the antidote provided for our death. How fitting it was that when the three wise men were led to Jesus by the shining of a new star in order to worship him, they did not see him giving back sight to the blind, or sound limbs to the lame, or speech to the dumb, or performing any other act of divine power; they saw but a silent child, lying quietly in his mother's care, a child who showed no sign of divine power,

but displayed only a miracle of humility. Thus the spectacle of the sacred childhood to which God the Son of God had adjusted himself presented their eyes with a sermon worthy of instilling into their ears; he would teach them by the effect of sight what he did not yet have the voice to utter aloud. For it was humility that began the total victory which the Saviour won over the devil and the world, and humility that completed it. He started his allotted days under persecution, and under persecution he brought them to an end. He was not without the endurance of suffering as a child, nor without a child's gentleness when he was about to suffer. By a single abasement of his royal greatness the only-begotten Son of God both willingly submitted to being born a man, and made himself capable of being slain by men.

If therefore God the Almighty has made good our excessively bad case by his special plea of humility, if he has laid death and the author of death in ruins by not refusing anything his persecutors did to him, by gently and mildly enduring the cruellest ferocity in obedience to his Father; how humble, how patient ought we not to be, who whatever trouble we find ourselves in only get what we deserve? 'For who will boast that he has a chaste mind, or that he is clear of sin?' (Prov. xx, 9.) St John says, 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John i, 8); which of us then will be found so free from blame that there is nothing whatever for justice to convict in him, or for mercy to condone? Thus it is, dearly beloved, that the whole lesson of Christian wisdom consists not in having plenty to say, or in being clever at argument, or in seeking praise and admiration, but in true and willing humility, which our Lord Jesus Christ chose and taught with all his might from his mother's womb to his execution on the cross. When his disciples, as the gospel tells us, were arguing among themselves 'which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he called a child and set him in the middle of them, and said, Amen I tell you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself like this little boy, he it is who will be the greater in the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. xviii, 1-6; Luke ix, 46-48). Christ *loves* childhood, which was the first state both of mind and body which he took upon himself. Christ *loves* childhood, the teacher of humility, standard of innocence, and pattern of gentleness. Christ *loves*

childhood, which he makes a model for the behaviour of adults, and to which he recalls men grown old in years; and those whom he raises up to the everlasting kingdom he first bends down to his own example.

But how are we to take this wonderful sort of conversion, and by what sort of change must we return to the childhood level? Let St Paul's teaching help us to a full understanding; 'Do not become little boys in sense, but in malice be children' (1 Cor. xiv, 20). So there is no question of our returning to the playthings and the first imperfect beginnings of our childhood, but of deriving something from it which is well suited to maturer years; let tempers be quickly recovered, and peace be soon restored; let there be no brooding over wrongs, no hankering for superiority, but instead a love of friendly companionship and an easy equality. It is a great blessing not to know how to do harm or to think evil. To do wrong and to pay it back belongs to the prudence of this world; but to pay no one back evil for evil is the childlike composure of the Christian. It is to this imitation of childhood, dearly beloved, that the mystery of today's feast invites you, this pattern of humility that the infant Saviour worshipped by the wise men suggests to you. To show his imitators what glory he has in store for them, he gave children the same age as himself the consecration of martyrdom, and children, born like Christ himself in Bethlehem, by sharing in his age became companions in his passion. May humility then be loved, and all conceit avoided by the faithful. Let everyone prefer others to himself, and not seek his own interests but those of others. So when kindly feelings are strong in all, the poison of envy will be found in none. For 'he who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted' (Luke xiv, 11), as is testified by our same Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Ghost lives and reigns, God for ever and ever, Amen.

