

Sermons of St John Henry Newman: (1) The Hidden Presence of Christ

This series of articles will try to convey the tenor of some Newman sermons (1). What follows is my summary of his sermon with the above title, knowing that any summary can only be a glimpse into its profundity.

Newman began this sermon with John 1:5: *“The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not”*. Christ was hidden from the world. When Jesus came, few discerned Him as the Messiah. One may think that it mattered little whether He came as prince or beggar. Yet it is more wonderful that He came in low estate. Had He come as prince, the world would have looked up to Him as prince. Coming as He did, He took upon Himself one additional humiliation, that of being scorned by men. He was born in a manger, lived quietly for 30 years and was condemned to die a criminal’s death by crucifixion. When He preached, his own relatives did not believe Him and thought Him deranged (2).

Jesus was in all respects a man, differing only in His lack of sin. Many did not detect this great difference. Many of us do not detect the goodness of those much better than ourselves, those who look similar to us, but whose inner goodness, exemplified in secret prayer and good works, is often hidden from our eyes. Would we have recognised in Jesus any possibility of His divinity, or might we have thought Him strange or eccentric? This is an awful thought since, had we been near Him for any long time and not recognised anything wonderful in Him, we might take it as proof that we were not His; for *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me”* (3). For those who might wish they had seen Jesus face to face, it is a sobering thought that, far from our sinful habits being reformed by His presence, those habits might well have hindered us from recognising Him, even had He told us who He was.

Why does this matter? We cannot insult Christ as those who did when He was on earth. Yet there may be sins greater even than the insult and injury offered to Christ’s physical person. Christ is still on earth by His Divine Spirit. He is not visible but keeps Himself as a hidden saviour, just as His Divinity was not appreciated when He lived as man. Men can, and do, reject His Presence, hidden as it is.

Also, unless we are careful, we may approach the hidden Saviour without due reverence. This is particularly so when we consider the tokens of His continuing Presence on earth. First, the Church is His Body, the instrument of His divine power; attacks on the Church are an attack on His Body. The clergy are imperfect, but Christ said to all His disciples: *“He that heareth you, heareth Me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me...”* (4). Next, Christ has made the poor, the weak and the afflicted instruments of His Presence. Jesus said whatever we have, or have not, done to the least of His brethren we have done, or not done, it to Him (5). This passage is more awful because the wicked, and even the righteous, had to ask: “Lord, when did we see you hungry, sick” etc? We must pray that Christ ever enlightens the eyes of our understanding so that we may belong to the Heavenly Host, not to this world.

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(1) Realizations: Newman’s own selection of his sermons: Ed. Ferrer Blehl (2009); (2) Mark 3:21; (3) John 10:27; (4) Luke 10:16; (5) Matthew 25: 35-40