

Advent Reflection for the Advent Evening Carol Service(1.12.19)

'O Rex Gentium'

Mark 11:1-10

The sixth antiphon is 'O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations):

*O King of the nations, and their desire,
the cornerstone making both one:
Come and save the human race,
which you fashioned from clay.*

Today, our chosen image is the painting, *The Virgin of the Rocks* by Leonardo da Vinci, ~1500.



Reflection by Bea Cowan:

Here we have Leonardo da Vinci's painting, best known as The Virgin of the Rocks.

Leonardo painted two similar paintings on this theme, one which is in the Louvre and which he painted twelve or so years before this one. That's the one you can see on your service sheet.

This is the one you can see in in the National Gallery of London, painted in oil on poplar wood - a surface, which is smooth and helps the colours to glow. It's on show in a special exhibition there until mid-January and then on general view in the main gallery.

Leonardo painted this version around the year 1500. It's packed full of symbolism and meaning, not just in the group of people portrayed here, but in the plants, rocks and much more.

You see as the focal point, Mary, the mother of Jesus, with John the Baptist on her right and an angel to her left, all adoring Jesus, shown on the right, a happy, smiling infant. Behind are rocks, water and distant mountains.

Christ, King of the Nations? This isn't your usual take on the title we give to Jesus in our last reflection tonight. But when I saw it ten days ago in London it spoke so much to what I was thinking about tonight.

This, Leonardo's second version of the subject, brings us bright flowers and figures very close to us in the forefront of the picture. Leonardo believed that, by manipulating light and dark, every object on the flat surface of a painting could be made to look convincingly three-dimensional, so you see the figures really standing out.

He had also studied the way light fell on objects and how these objects took on the colour of the lighting source. Look at the way the light falls onto Mary's face on the left hand side, and lights up that side of her face, so setting her off even more clearly.

It is morning light, early morning, with all the softness that light at that time of day brings to whatever it lights.

Look at the distant mountains. They are not only blue, as in the further distance, but see how the blue gets gradually paler as they recede to the left. So they seem further away because the colour and the saturation of the colour decreases, the detail more blurred, Sfumato as the technique is known in the trade.

And the rocks themselves which form the background to the scene are darker, more craggy, more ridged and with many more fissures than in the earlier painting.

There was a rich tradition of paintings of biblical scenes illustrated with rocky settings but this is by far the most vivid. The whole scene is far from the traditional one people were accustomed to see of an image of the virgin and Child.

Perhaps this was the reason the people who had commissioned the painting in the first place, for the central panel of a side altar triptych, rejected the first version.

But here Leonardo gave them the same image with far more depth and perception.

With the Christ child the focus of adoration.

Stored away in his encyclopaedia of a mind, Leonardo had ideas nobody had dreamt of at the time. He had studied the landscape around him when he had overseen the digging of canals, seen rocks in the Italian Alps, marvelled at shells preserved in strata which had been forced high up in the mountain tops by the earth's movement. He realised the world was far older than anyone of his time would dare to admit.

This setting for his virgin and child suggests the beginning of time. It visualises the doctrine believed at the time that Mary herself had existed since before time, before the creation of the world. It was a bold painting and may have disturbed some people. I suggest it tells us even more.

To me it also represents God become flesh, the Word from the beginning of time; 'The Word became flesh and lived among us,' as St John puts it in the first chapter of his Gospel.

Here he is, Jesus Christ, the anointed one, now a defenceless child, one to whom you instinctively want to stretch out arms and protect. Yet soon he will be threatened. His parents will flee with him to Egypt to avoid his being killed by Herod. He will grow up to be scoffed and scorned, and he will die a death upon the cross for our sake. Still defenceless.

There are two sides to the life and death to come of this child whose coming we prepare for this Advent:

God become flesh, God exposed to the whim of ordinary human beings.

Love your enemies, this infant will grow up to say! Pray for those who abuse you. If someone slaps you in the face, turn the other cheek!
People will listen to him, huge crowds throng round him, hang on to his every word, listen to him like no one before.

He will be ready to suffer for his convictions, practice what he preaches, and die because of them, giving us what seems like a crazy message, so different from any message we've ever heard before - impractical, yet irresistible.

He will give us a glimpse of the way life can be, the way it should be - the way one day one day it will be!

We are told that the strongest survive, that we need to look after number one, that in this world it's a question of 'never mind other folk. Just make sure we are all right'.

This child will call us to follow another way - the way of humility, sacrifice and self - denial, the way of putting the interests of others before our own. He will turn accepted wisdom on its head, claim that the meek shall inherit the earth, tell us that it is those who are willing to lose their lives who will truly find them.

It runs against most of what we know about human nature.

But we have seen for ourselves that the world's way leads so often to grief, sorrow and division.

God incarnate, whose birth we will celebrate this Christmas, who brings light to the world, is Christ, our King.

May we have faith and courage to live out the foolishness, the topsy-turvy message of the gospel,
and so to bring closer Christ's kingdom, here on Earth.

O Rex Gentium

O King of our desire whom we despise,
King of the nations never on the throne,
Unfound foundation, cast-off cornerstone,
Rejected joiner, making many one,
You have no form or beauty for our eyes,
A King who comes to give away his crown,
A King within our rags of flesh and bone.
We pierce the flesh that pierces our disguise,
For we ourselves are found in you alone.
Come to us now and find in us your throne,
O King within the child within the clay,
O hidden King who shapes us in the play
Of all creation. Shape us for the day
Your coming Kingdom comes into its own.

(Malcolm Guite)