

6th December 2020 - Nicholas the Wonderworker
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It happened when I was doing my Theology degree at Bristol University all those years ago. I must have been about twenty years old, and one evening I was in the Theological section of the University library when it caught my eye; a peculiar name, written in a column, going down the spine of a large book: the letters, CHRYSOSTOM. It was my first encounter with the saint who would become my patron, whose name I would eventually take. And the rest, as they say, is history.

When we consider the saints of God, we might think of them as having three lives, or rather, three ways in which they are known. There is firstly, the life they lived on earth, the historical life, lived out among the people of their own day. Next, comes the life of the hagiography, what was written down about them by another generation, such as the Life of St Anthony of Egypt, written by St Athanasius of Alexandria. Finally, there is the encounter and the relationship that we have with them through the celebration of their feast days, their intercessions for us, and the whole relationship that we can build up with our own, particular patron saint.

We know a lot, of course, about the actual life and times of St John of Antioch, nicknamed the *Golden Mouth*, the Chrysostom; he also left behind a whole

corpus of written works; one of the most prolific of the fathers. Today, however, we commemorate one who is, after the Theotokos I suppose, one of the most popular of all Christian saints, both east and west, if not *the* most popular: St Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Lycia.

By contrast, we have very few historical details about St Nicholas' life. His years of his life, 270 - 343 AD, were turbulent times in the late Roman Empire, but within two hundred years after his death his veneration was well established. Around the year 515AD, Theodoret mentions his name as among those who attended the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in the year 325. Indeed, there is a story that at one point during the council, St Nicholas could stand it no longer, and fired up with holy zeal, struck the arch-heretic, Arius, on the mouth for uttering his blasphemies, much to the alarm of the other bishops present who piously eschewed any such violence.

St Nicholas' holy relics, for the most part, now rest at Bari in Italy. When I taught a course in early Christianity to Year Nines at school, I usually caused grave alarm when I informed them that I knew where *Santa Claus* was buried! But today we can, just for a while, set to one side all that seasonal paraphernalia: the popular customs, the homely decorations and accretions that give character to the coming celebration, no matter what their origins. We can, instead, turn our attention today towards St Nicholas

and, in so doing, discover a far better connection with the coming feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, enjoyable as the more picturesque elements are.

Primarily, as a bishop, the story of St Nicholas presents him as a staunch defender of Orthodox dogma and teaching. As a guardian and keeper of the true, apostolic faith, he set his own seal to the declarations of the First Council, affirming the eternally divine nature of the incarnate Christ, the Son of God. This, for us, is the central point of the coming feast of the Nativity. The very idea of God the Son taking on our flesh and being born among us to redeem and save and transfigure our fallen nature, is the key to understanding *why* Christmas is celebrated among us.

As for the rest of the winter-tide feasting, the pagan midwinter, the solstice and the primordial longing for light in a dark, northern hemisphere, we may let all that rest for a time. There is no harm in ancient, time-honoured customs and folk traditions, only it is sad that modern people have abandoned the fasting that quite properly preceded the feasting of their ancestors, and that in a changing Britain, the real traditional Christmas has largely been abandoned in favour of commerce. When before, decorations were put up around Christmas Eve and remained for twelve days, now we see them in October, and they start to disappear around Boxing Day! But if we seek authenticity in *our* feast, we are in good company with

St Nicholas. We have only to look at the groups of people for whom Nicholas is the patron saint, the one to call upon in need. When heterodox Christians, looking from the outside at the Orthodox Church, wrongly imagine that we are all about ritual and mysticism, you have only to consider the list of patronage belonging to St Nicholas to see how wrong they are.

Among those who seek his prayers and protection are children, sailors, fishermen, pharmacists, merchants, brewers, unmarried people, those accused falsely, repenting villains, barrel makers and even broadcasters. Cities and whole nations claim him as their patron too. From the mundane to the critical, people have asked St Nicholas to pray for them. So many are the stories of his powerful intervention that he is called the Wonderworker. Here, too, we see in the saint's generosity a reflection of the spirit of the coming feast: the self-giving love of God.

St John tells us in his first epistle *'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.'* [1Jn.4:10-11] Truly Nicholas has become an icon of that love, whether in his life, his legend or in his continuing patronage. But if we are to be worthy of that generosity, if we too expect miracles of intervention in our lives, whether it is to strengthen our

children from malign influences in this world, or just to stop the brewing ale from going sour, we too must be generous: forgiving trespasses as we seek to be forgiven; charitable to the unloved, and even the unworthy; giving to the needful stranger, as well as to our family and friends. For as Our Lord says in Matthew's gospel, *'But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? [Matt.5:44-46]*

Yes, we are called to be extraordinary people, those who acknowledge and witness to the love of God for us, by loving one another and those beyond us. But surrounded in the Church, as we are, by the prayers of the saints, we are in extraordinary company. The saints are those in Christ for whom our fallen nature, the old Adam, has been transfigured in Christ; those who, by grace, participate in the divine nature and live eternally reflecting the energies of God, love, power, wisdom, healing, blessedness. We shall do well if, this Nativity, through our fasting, our preparation, our repentance, our worship, our giving, and our participation in grace through the Holy Gifts, we come that bit closer to that blessed life in the kingdom of God.

In St Nicholas we have a true shepherd and no hireling, an icon after the pattern of the Good Shepherd Himself. May St Nicholas pray for us, so that, as we read in the epistle appointed on his feast today, we may be equipped with everything good that we may do God's will. Let us, therefore, measure ourselves and our condition, contemplating the words of his troparion, that where we fall short, his prayer on high may help us indeed.

The truth of thy deeds hath revealed thee to thy flock as a canon of faith, an icon of meekness, and a teacher of abstinence; for this cause thou hast achieved the heights by humility, riches by poverty, O Father and Hierarch Nicholas, intercede with Christ God that our souls may be saved.