

Reflection for St Lucy's Day (December 13) by David Kennedy

Today the Church commemorates one of a number of famous child martyrs, St Lucy. Lucy or Lucia lived at the beginning of the 4th century in Syracuse in modern Sicily. She was from a wealthy family but her father died when she was young, and so the family lost its means of income. Lucy was a committed Christian, and she pledged her virginity to God, hoping to be able to distribute her significant dowry to the care of the poor. However, her mother prevailed upon her to be married to a wealthy pagan suitor. But during her betrothal, she began to give away her dowry. One tradition states that she would take gifts to persecuted Christian who were hiding in the catacombs during the persecution begun by the Emperor Diocletian. Her fiancé was enraged and reported her to the authorities; she refused to honour the Emperor as god and she was martyred on this day in the year 304. She was probably in her late teens.

In the old Julian Calendar, this day was regarded as the Winter Solstice (in our calendar it falls on 20 or 21 December). The name Lucy, means light, and as a martyr she witnessed to the true Light.

If you visit Scandinavia on St Lucy's Day, you will discover how significant today's festival is. In Sweden and Norway especially, there will be St Lucy Processions. The Procession is led by a young girl, dressed in a long white robe, with a red sash tied round her to symbolise martyrdom. On her head is set a wreath with 4 or 6 lit white candles to symbolise her name Light. In Scandinavian folklore, the night of 13 December was dangerous – a time for evil and malevolent spirits to be at large. Lucy's wreath of light was to banish this darkness. The girl chosen to be St Lucy, a great honour, is accompanied in the procession by handmaids, also dressed in white with a red sash who carry individual candles. They are joined by Star-boys who wear white robes and white pointed hats and carry sticks with stars attached to them, and gingerbread men carrying lanterns and elves. There is often traditional St Lucy music, and gifts of ginger-bread, saffron buns, mulled wine, almonds and raisins are distributed.

Some of this may go back to ancient Winter Solstice traditions, but for Christians the fact that St Lucy's Day falls in Advent and close to Christmas naturally sets the story of Lucy as a witness to the great Light that came into the world at Christmas, the light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness has never extinguished.

But the story of Lucy links life and death. She was a martyr and the red sashes are a visible sign of the blood that was shed. So, St Lucy's Day also connects Christmas

with the Lord's Passion. We must not see the great events of salvation in isolation. Jesus assumed our frail flesh at his Incarnation, taking our humanity into the Godhead, but the same Jesus also suffered and died to deal with our sins, and to overcome death by his resurrection. So, twice, today's collect mentions the Cross:

God our redeemer,
who gave light to the world that was in darkness
by the healing power of the Saviour's cross:
shed that light on us, we pray,
that with your martyr Lucy
we may, by the purity of our lives,
reflect the light of Christ,
and, by the merits of his passion,
come to the light of everlasting life.

Dark days before Christmas. We are a week away from the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year. But then the days gradually lengthen. Next year, Easter is early at the end of March, so we will celebrate near to the Spring Equinox. And the Light that came at Christmas will intensify and fill this Church as dawn breaks on Easter Day, as we light the Paschal Candle in a pitch-black Church, and from it light our individual candles until the glorious dawn breaks and we acclaim, 'Christ is risen. Alleluia.' Darkness is vanquished, night is turned to resplendent day.

And today's festival embraces that movement as Advent, Christmas, Holy Week and Easter come together in the story of Lucy. Lucy witness to that Light that can never be extinguished and now, as part of the white-robed army of martyrs, shares the light and glory of heaven. May she inspire us to be bearers of the Christ-light in Corbridge today.