

A Parting of Friends

A Sermon preached in S. Mary the Virgin, Bourne Street at the High Mass of Requiem for Founders and Benefactors on Saturday, 2 July 2011 by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library, Pusey House, Oxford

The last pure light is streaming on the sea
And the first star is dying quietly.
Here on the sand your driftwood fire has died,
And the charred sticks have spluttered in the tide.
The green waves breathe their monstrous breath,
They make a stony music of their death
Foaming and fawning on the pebble shore.
There is no sound of voices any more.
The waves break, break, in their cold miseries,
They will not leave their last lamenting kiss,
Suck soul from stones and vapour it away,
Which groaning they return, sighing repay.
Sleep Alasdair, cold ash by the cold sea,
And be as cold as sea or stone can be:
Until from this bare green and crested white
The wasted ash of men shall rise in light.¹

THAT poetic lamentation by Peter Levi written for his friend, Alasdair Clayre, dead by his own hand, speaks more eloquently and movingly than most of us can manage about death. Rather than the conventional, although undoubtedly heartfelt, pieties and banalities of death, he speaks of the “driftwood fire” of death, the “stony music of their death” - how cold and forlorn is that?: “no sound of voices any more,” “cold miseries,” “cold ash by cold sea.” His vocabulary of death is stark and unconsolatory. Those of us who have suffered the death of those most loved may still recognize the cold grip of death, the numb incomprehension, the emptiness; because a little of us has died too; we may well have felt “as cold as sea or stone can be.”

If that is how the bereaved experience death, there is at least something real and immediate in its emotional draining, in its physical impact. But nowadays, there seems there is something different with which we have to contend. The Russian Orthodox Archbishop and seer, the late Anthony Bloom, once observed that when an Englishman or woman dies everyone is mildly embarrassed, as though the recently deceased has committed some frightful social indiscretion. Death is the ultimate *faux pas*. My sense is that this age and this society is uneasy with death. It is now the ultimate taboo. The growth and popularity of the Memorial Service several months after the death, certainly in the University of Oxford, is the acceptable way in which it memorializes its sons and daughters and turns it into a celebration of life and achievement. The power and sting of death has been drawn by its euphemistic cover and by its sentimentalisation. But death, like faith and like love, falls beyond jurisdictional boundaries of etiquette and social nicety.

What is it which causes this awkwardness, this embarrassment in the face of death? Well, the answer is, I think, Protestantism. In the pre-Reformation world, we might say in the pre-lapsarian world, or, if we are being controversial, we might say in the pre-apostate world (but I am never controversial), let us say, that in the medieval world death and the after-life may have been terrifying and macabre in their detail and representation and

¹ Peter Levi, *For Alasdair Clayre* from *Shakespeare's Birthday* London, Anvil Press Poetry [1985] p 38

depiction in parish churches and in the imaginations of most people, but it was intelligible, it was of the every day, dying was part of the fabric of living, not shut away or shut off from day to day reality. There was an easy commerce between this world and the next. The dying received the comfortable ministrations of the Church in the Viaticum and the Last Rites. It cannot be without significance that a high percentage of priests died during the Black Death. Requiems were sung for the dead, chantries were built, chantry priests employed to pray for the dead, guilds were formed with prayer for the dead as part of their constitutions, practice and habit.

In its vandalism and iconoclasm, Protestantism put an end to all that. What had been social and familial became something solitary, something to be faced alone. Judgement had to be faced alone. Personal dread and fear overrode the balm of Holy Oil. Requiem masses were no longer said or sung for the repose of souls. Prayers for the dead once regularly and fervently offered were forbidden, banned. Pennies and pounds, groats and guineas once paid to spring souls of loved ones from Purgatory were stopped: Purgatory was abolished. A protestant cosmology placed death so far beyond human understanding and comprehension that it was removed from the natural intercourse of human activity: it became not merely unfamiliar and unfamiliar, but uninteresting.

A change in perception was followed by a change in practice. Funery methods were inefficient, time and space-consuming, uneconomic. The vast increase in mortality demanded new techniques of corpse disposal. Yet the very fact that human burial could be viewed in this light, and spoken of in this language, as a purely technical and administrative problem was an expression of a coarse utilitarianism, that reached its grotesque and perverted apogee in the era of godless communism. "The manner in which the Soviets treated the dead was an accurate reflection of the manner in which they treated the living."² The relics and the bodies of saints were exposed and desecrated: cemeteries were plundered for iron and marble, state cemeteries and mass graves, anonymous and impersonal, replaced individual graves, apart from those for the favoured few: at least the peasant pieties and practices of the medieval world rested on a belief in the absolute value and human life.

A Catholic cosmology has never really lost that sense of intimacy with the dead, and it is something that the Oxford Movement, the Catholic Revival in the Church of England has recovered. As Catholic Christians, we understand that the gap between dead and living is not an unbridgeable one. Catholicism, the Christian religion properly understood is an incarnational religion, a materialistic religion. The enfleshment of the eternal Word in the person of Jesus Christ is central and, literally, crucial to its nature. The "resurrection of the body" is no empty credal phrase. It is there in the final two lines of Peter Levi's lamentation:

"From this bare green and crested white
The wasted ash of men shall rise in light."

There is the transformation; there is the transfiguration; there is the hope and the glory, the consummation of body and soul ... from the cold stone and miseries, from the voiceless emptiness, from the "stony music," from "the cold ash by the cold sea," "the wasted ash of men shall rise in light." Birth, life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, glorification – death's defeat, life's affirmation.

The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ are death-defying and life-enhancing, and they signify the infinite and inescapable love and mercy of God. Judgement, certainly we will be accountable and under judgement but it will be within that context of mercy and in the defining context of the Trinitarian relationship of love, the reciprocity and exchange of love in the Most Holy Trinity that is around us and within us. We have witnessed something of that love mirrored in our own lives, in our own relationships, in our communion, that sacral relationship we all enjoy. Our love is not

² From a book review by Edward Skidelsky in the Daily Telegraph 2 December 2000

earth-bound. At the sacred heart of the pleading of this Sacrifice is the eternal and the forever, is the fact of Christ's Passion and of his Resurrection from the dead and the fearful conviction, expressed by the poet, that "the wasted ash of men shall rise in light."

Our Lord's Calvary brought together on the Cross the whole of humanity. All was brought together as one; all was reconciled and made whole, transformed through, by and in love, the self-sacrificial love of Jesus: but what is love but self-sacrifice? This representation, this anamnesis of Christ's Sacrifice is the most social of sacraments, the one that unites us one to another, that unites us with those who have gone before us, not least those Founders and Benefactors, great and mighty, poor and lowly, known and unknown, whose generosity paid for this building and sustained its life and mission and for whom this Mass is offered, not least among the servants of this place, Father John Gilling; and it unites us in the everlasting love of God poured out for us in his Son and in this Sacrament of his Body and his Blood. Earth and heaven are united, time and the eternal and the forever meet at this *axis mundi et caeli*. As God in Christ sought our society in the Incarnation, so we aspire to his divine society in this Mass.

We are part of a community, a communion, members one of another in the Body of Christ, members of the divine society, the Church Catholic. The Church reaches beyond us, beyond even the walls of this Church, the Church Militant and active, the Church Expectant, the Church Triumphant. Living and departed, we are all children of God, all part of the whole. Part of our being and our nature is to be summoned to life, a life lived well here and a life in heaven. Our destiny is to see God face to face. Our communion here is a question, in part at least, of perceiving this world and the world to come as united in a common quest towards the fulfilment and the consummation of the purposes of God. "We give them back to thee, dear Lord, who gavest them to us; yet as thou dost not lose them in giving, so we have not lost them by their return: not as the world giveth, givest thou, O Lord, lover of souls, what thou gavest thou takest not away, for what is thine is ours always if we are thine, and life is eternal, and love is immortal, and death is only a horizon, nothing save a limit to our sight."³

All Masses of Requiem, all masses, said or sung, offered *pro defunctis*, are bitter-sweet occasions. Because we are human, they taste of the bitter herbs of loss, they speak of longing and yearning, of tears and sorrow at the parting of friends, the loss of their regular society, the dislocation of familiar ties of friendship, the inevitable rupture of relationships. Yet in the Requiem Mass is the sweet savour and consolation of Our Lord's Resurrection from the dead that promises us gain not loss, consummation and fulfillment, joy and eternal felicity, the reunion and reconciliation of friends in a new and greater social harmony, in a wider fellowship and communion, the restoration of relationships. It is the new Jerusalem to which this church is only a gateway: and if this is but a gateway, think how wonderful must be the House of God, the new Jerusalem to which we are bound: "Jerusalem the golden ... What social joys are there, what radiancy of glory, what light beyond compare."⁴

"From this bare green and crested white
The wasted ash of men shall rise in light."

³ William Penn

⁴ Hymn 381 NEH Bernard of Cluny Tr John Mason Neale