

A Feast of Fat Things

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Bourne Street on Saturday 7th February 2015, at a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of David Trendell

Isaiah 25. 6-9. 1 Corinthians 15. 51-57. John. 11 21-27.

"... the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined ..."

To be sure, it was not difficult to settle on this particular passage of Scripture for this particular occasion. There's a richness, an extravagant, generous *bon vivant* roundedness, to the prophet's vision that fits David and the life we celebrate, the death we mourn today. Rich friendships richly evidenced by the size of this gathering ... rich family loyalties and relationships ... richness and largeness of intellect, of imagination, of talent ... generosity of entertainment, of opinions offered (sometimes quite trenchantly), of hilarity shared – a whinnying laugh that we miss already ...

There is, indeed, much to celebrate richly, and so we do, in rich music and rich liturgy: "*a feast of fat things*", indeed.

Of course, for us who are Christians, and for David, it is a celebration not just retrospective, but prospective. We are not just looking *back* with thankfulness, nostalgia, regret and love (vitaly important though these things are), but we are looking *forward*, also – to the feast, the banquet, that lies before us, that is to be set for us. That is the hope, the promise, that gives substance and meaning to everything that we do today: to our remembering, our music and liturgy, our prayers and our laughter and storytelling and reminiscence. All this constitutes and will constitute the feast of fat things set before us in the *bon vivant* generosity of God.

But, if we're honest – and because we're mortal – that promise is not necessarily easy for us. Mourning is real and it is dark. That is the cost of love: the pain and the perplexity of us who mourn David is the mark and the currency of our love for him and the delight we have taken in the life that has been so peremptorily foreshortened.

There is, indeed, great challenge for us in the continuation of the prophecy:

"[God] will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations ..."

We are gathered to celebrate, to remember, to give thanks, to feast and to look forward to feasting, but we do so from deep within the veil, heavily under the covering of grief and loss and all that goes with them.

With Martha of Bethany we resent death – David's death, all death. "*Lord*", we say with her, "*if thou hadst been here [our] brother had not died*" Where were you? Why had this to happen? Any celebration of the past, any anticipation of the joy that is to come – however fat, however rich – that did not acknowledge this truth, start with this resentment, in tears and the veil, would be in danger of being hollow and delusional, mere sentiment and whistling optimism.

Jesus' response to Martha – as always in the Gospel – is entirely devastating. *“I am the resurrection, and the life ...”* in the very house of death! It is an outrageous claim, breathtaking in its magnitude, one might almost say (given the rather fluffy empathy that seems to pass these days for good pastoral practice) in its insensitivity. “As you mourn, Martha, as you struggle with loss and puzzlement and anger, in frustration at the unfinished, I proclaim to you in my person, in my presence, in my very body and blood, the resurrection: and the completion of what is so raw, so partial and so bleeding, so incomplete for you.”

And that claim – the claim that Jesus makes to Martha and her sister in the house of the dead Lazarus – is the claim we make, in obedience to his command, in this and every Eucharist. We claim and proclaim completion: life, death, resurrection. We claim and proclaim in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus completion for David, even for David, dead at the age of 50 with so much apparently unfulfilled.

Rightly, in human terms, we will mourn what is *not* complete: a natural span of years, a prodigious talent not yet fully realised or recognised (though the fellowship is a welcome sign), things not fully integrated – but in *divine* terms, in the economy of God, David is complete in Christ Jesus. And this Mass rehearses that and enacts that and insists that: David born into Christ, alive in Christ and risen with Christ! Alleluia!

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“... the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible ...”

It is more or less impossible to hear these words of St Paul without Handel's accompaniment. For David the trumpet sounds, not just (as for Bunyan's Pilgrim) “on the other side”, but *here*, among us, where its call is audible and palpable and challenging: here, in this Eucharist, in the body and blood of him who is the resurrection and the life.

Thus, and thus alone, may we be given the courage and the chutzpah to proclaim:

“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting?”