

A sermon preached at St Mary's, Bourne Street, on Tuesday 15th October 2019, by the Reverend Prebendary Alan Moses, at a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of Mark Bushby.

There are times when we hear news which stuns us into wordless silence or provokes only an inarticulate cry of anguish. Our hearts are troubled. We struggle to comprehend; to find words and meaning. Most of us, all of us, I'm sure, must have felt like that when we heard of Mark's death – and we have gone on feeling that way; for him and for Julia and Lucy and Sophia – those two wee girls I held in my arms at the font in All Saints, Margaret Street – and whom we hold and enfold in our love and prayers.

But a preacher must preach and must find words, and choirs must sing and find tunes; even if our voices crack before we are finished, and Louisa Green's mascara is running down her face.

The Church's services for the dead provide us with words of comfort and encouragement and hope. Its music, which was so much a part of Mark's life, can transform our anguished cries.

In this liturgy, we give thanks for the life and love and friendship and work of someone who was part of our lives; as a husband, a dad, a son, a teacher, a colleague, a fellow singer, even on the football terraces. Often a funeral service comes at the end of a long life; someone has died full of years and at peace. But we cannot pretend that is so today. Mark is gone from us all too soon.

Those of us who have loved ones or friends who suffer from depression, who see them sometimes in the morning before they have put on that brave face-the world smile which hides their desolation, know how much of a struggle holding it at bay can be. And we fear that one day the struggle may just be too much for them; that the “encircling gloom” will envelop the one we love for the last time – and their reserves of courage and hope and love will have run out. And we will feel powerless to help them.

So many of my memories of Mark him are of him singing in the choir at All Saints. My mind goes back to him chanting one of the readings at Tenebrae – that service of shadows – in Holy Week - as the darkness gathers around our Lord, who will cry out in dereliction from the cross: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” This is no God who floats serenely above our pain and anguish, our despair and isolation, but one who has plumbed its depths; one who is there even when we feel only absence. As we sing with the Psalmist: “If I climb up to heaven, thou art there: If I go down to hell, thou art there also.”

But it is amid that darkness, in the Upper Room, at the Last Supper, that Jesus speaks those words of hope and encouragement to distressed and frightened disciples; words which he speaks again to us in this Mass: “let not your hearts be troubled.”

The “mansions” of the King James translation of St. John's Gospel sound rather grand – as if heaven is an up-market retirement community like the one Dr Harry Brama has just moved into. But in his commentary on this passage, Archbishop William Temple suggests that they are more like the caravanserais found along the highways of the ancient world; places where travellers could rest on their journey.

Groups of travellers would often send someone ahead to prepare a place for them. Our Lord speaks of himself as such a one; the one who has trod the way of faith before us - “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” - and makes ready to welcome us. We may well be far from perfect fellowship with the Father – like Peter who would soon deny Our Lord, or the rest of the disciples who would forsake him in flight. We all have a long journey before our pilgrimage is accomplished. But in his mercy God provides us with resting places and he promises not simply to wait for us at journey's end, but to come and take us to himself.

The Lord calls us to holiness, to an ultimate perfection; but he points us here and now to what is for each of us the next stage, the next resting place on the way to it. And as we follow him, we find him there to welcome us. More than that, he comes to lead us: “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will receive you to myself.” He returns to encourage and lead us to the resting place prepared. That resting place is fellowship, fuller than before with the Lord - “that where I am you may be also” - until the last stage is reached.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Purgatory is a place not of despair but of hope and of gradually increasing light. It is a place where people sing together. The poem is full of people who are in the process of learning from each other, flourishing as they acquire deeper self-knowledge and self-awareness, as they rediscover the human capacity for happiness. These souls see themselves as a community, a fellowship, whose suffering, praying and singing is done together. This is not just a picture of the next life but of how life should be in the here and now: it is a place where people behave as we should behave now. So we suffer and sing and pray together today with and for Mark; with and for each other.

The Communion of Saints which we will soon be celebrating at All Saintstide, is not just about a collection of perfect people whose goodness and holiness we might admire from afar but cannot hope to emulate. It is about our relationship, our communion, with God and with each other in the love of Christ. That relationship, that love, transcends the boundary of death, so Mark is still part of it, so we sing and pray with him and for him, as we trust he does for us.

To borrow the words of another preacher and a poet, John Henry Newman, canonised this past Sunday, words which Mark will have sung at many an Evensong, we pray for him and for ourselves:

“Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
 Lead thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
 Lead thou me on.
Keep thou my feet, I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

So long thy power hath blest me, sure it still
 Will lead me on.
Oe'r moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
 The night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile,
which I have loved long since and lost a while.”

Let us pray.

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shades lengthen and the evening cometh, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work done. Then, Lord, in thy mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.