

Pouring Life Away

We don't hold life cheap. The great stories of our culture are all about the valuing of life, finding life precious, the discovery that to save life we are prepared to suffer or even to die ourselves - not only for those we love, but even for those we don't know and, in rare cases, those we might be pardoned for hating. Such stories embody our instinct that life itself, irrespective of its comparative quality, deserves to be kept safe.

Nature Is Prodigious

However, there is in nature a contrary trend of sheer wastefulness: "Mother" Nature seems ready to burn, bury, drown life, to feed on life, to throw it away. So while we display our (human) nature by solicitous care and love, we also display a different face of nature when we destroy, even squander our own or another's life or well-being. Geneticists often point to this prodigality in nature: for example, in that so many fertilized ova fail to implant in the womb, and are regularly lost; this is meant to authorise in us too a certain casual attitude to unborn life, since "Mother" Nature herself is so ready to waste it. It can't be denied that our efforts as human beings have been fairly evenly divided between the finding of new ways to prolong and improve life, and the finding of new ways to blast it into extinction. I believe the Great Auk and the Dodo are with me in this opinion. (The Giant Panda is thinking about it.)

The Offering Of Sacrifice

One mode of loving human behaviour which is very visible to me is that of sacrifice. I see it all the time: and it rings a bell with me, even when it is given for things I might not value all that highly. A teenager getting up every morning to deliver papers is often making great sacrifices (usually for ridiculously small rewards). Another gets up to train in a swimming-pool for two hours before school starts (incomprehensible!). I saw on the television some time ago children who get up to care for their disabled mother, even returning home at lunch time to make sure she is all right, and losing nearly all their free time in the process; these selfless beings finish their homework, and then do the ironing or play with smaller siblings. What was moving about them was their acceptance of these tasks, without bitterness or sulking. Where do these reserves live in the children I

know? Buried fairly deep, I feel! But perhaps only dormant, waiting for their moment of need. When human beings awoken to need, they are ready to love sacrificially.

The Mystery Of Ageing

Getting older almost always involves the acceptance of restrictions and limitation. We can no longer do what we did, or would like to do. Reading Ecclesiastes in the liturgy this year I recognised all too clearly the feelings of that under-medicated sage of Israel, who knew so clearly about arthritis (*when a hill is too hard to climb, and a walk is something to dread*) and loss of appetite (*when the time comes when you say, "These no longer give me pleasure"*). Maybe God gets some of us started on the practice of sacrifice, by loosening our hold on the things we are to give up. The phenomenon is much too universal to be an accident; it's as if there is a tide running in our nature. We learn it when we plan our lives or our careers, and make the sacrifice of studying hard, working long hours, to realise a dream. We learn it when we fall in love, and the heart is plucked out of us; we learn it in becoming parents, and find a tiny person is more to us than our own life. But in getting old, in losing the power to make sense of our life, to earn our keep, even perhaps the power to *matter* in the world, we find ourselves turned from the meanings that are earthly, and more and more to be aware that all lesser meanings flow towards a single uniting meaning, not dependent on us or our perceptions or the time-bound experiences we've found important. I think this is where the Letter to Timothy is standing in today's liturgy; and I'm sure that is why it speaks of a final judgment. This is nothing more than the ultimate revelation of what God meant when he made us. That's what will be revealed to us in our meeting with God. I hope, and believe, that some of it will be familiar to us, so that we run towards our loving Father with *Amen, alleluia!* But I hope and believe that it will also be a true moment of revelation, where all our questions will finally be answered, and we will find ourselves drawing our first huge breath of a new and eternal life which will overthrow the shadows and guesses by which we have lived, all the half-measures and compromises into which we've strayed, and make us glad to pour out our life in total love. Look forward to it!

Fr Philip