

Homily for Peter

1st December 2000

The death of a Christian is a meeting-place between all that is unredeemed in us, and all that is redeemed: a place for tears and joy, for convulsion and hope. The feelings which afflict us today, and the words of faith which comfort us, both have their place, and there is nothing in this experience which cannot be turned to God's glory. The meeting of the redeemed and the unredeemed can have only one result, because it is the re-presentation of a battle already won, the encounter between us and our Redeemer; he is already victorious, already the Lord of all.

We have listened to a story of Jesus on the threshold of his own death, and to reflect on it will once again call us to be changed, and to glimpse the way of our redemption. When someone as strong and committed as my uncle, Peter, is suddenly swept into eternity – as he wanted, busy to the last on behalf of the Church – we feel at first that he has lost his footing, we sense the tide of chaos that overwhelms human lives, the return of the dark powers that were pinned back at Creation. The Passion of Jesus, too, was certainly seen like this at first: the triumph of the reign of darkness, the Word, silenced forever by the mute sentence of Pilate, the love drowned and smothered in a tide of hatred and contempt. It was the contemplation of that possibility which darkened the minds, and eyes, of those who walked to Emmaus. But in our story of the Last Supper Jesus himself steals a march on this judgment. Deliberately, with full knowledge of his mission and his destination, knowing how close hatred had come, even to his own table, he rises from his place, and assumes for them the condition of a slave.

This willing subjection of Jesus is astonishing, and disturbing, to those who receive it. And see how it is Peter who leads the Christian Church in *refusing* the gift Jesus offers. Let us not mistake the solemnity of this moment: the leader of the apostles, with all the force he can muster, denies Jesus the rôle he chooses to assume, confronts the Saviour with his *Never! You shall never wash my feet!*

“The Lord's designs shall stand for ever, the plans of his heart endure from age to age.”

The gaze between Jesus and Peter in this moment is the encounter between the Redeemer and the unredeemed: Peter's *never*, and Jesus' *ever*. *Unless I wash you, you can have no share with me*. We are like Peter in our failure to understand; even as we fail here, on this funeral day, Jesus knows, and allows for, our ignorance: *now you do not understand what I am doing for you. Later you will understand*. It is very important that we hold on to that compassion of Christ, who is prepared to live with our ignorance, until he teaches us, by the Cross, to share his own knowledge, and no longer to be slaves, but friends, because he has taught us all he has learned from the Father.

Later you will understand. “Later” is three dawns away, in the sunrise of Easter: at the Last Supper the sun is sinking, and Judas is still present, his feet washed like those of James and John and Peter. When he goes out, having taken the piece of bread from Jesus' hand, it will be into the darkness. This is where we who mourn find ourselves today; *night has fallen* for all of us equally; but, like the Passover darkness in Egypt, it is a night that will divide light from darkness, as in the Creation. “This is the victory over the world: *our faith*.” It is on the rock of the faith that Christ can build his Church; and it is most moving to us to know how this faith was born surrounded by darkness and ignorance, in confusion and human failure. None of

that matters at all, because it is the plan of God that is unfolding, and not a human design.

In our recent retreat, those who are preparing for the diaconate in our Diocese meditated on the word *servant*. We discovered that, in the Bible, it is used almost indiscriminately with the word *slave*: and Jesus knew that, towards his Father, his service was not to be distinguished from the total service of a slave. It was in perfect freedom, in the intimacy of his circle of disciples, that Jesus laid aside his garments and took up the path of slavery. In this he was teaching them how to read the moment when he would be arrested, and bound, and led away, and condemned by priest and prefect – he was teaching them that there too he would be walking in perfect freedom, the freedom and glory of the Son of God. In his Last Supper he showed us that he was laying down his life, not having it snatched from him by others. And his dying is the pattern for Peter's, the pattern for ours.

About uncle Peter one of the family remarked: *He never really stopped working at any time*. I think that is true, and I think the Father honoured him with a genuine personal gift, in the way of his death. Let us waste no time being sorry for Peter. He has lost precisely nothing except his problems. Jesus inspires in us, in this marvellous Gospel, to think that, in the real kingdom, there are no Monsignors, no Protonotaries Apostolic, not even any Vicars General. There is Jesus, and Peter, and the workings of their minds as they look into one another's eyes. Our mind is *weighed down by this earthly tent*, and we have to find temporary peace as we reflect that *now we do not understand: later we will*. But now Peter has entered into the understanding of the Spirit, the whole truth. We pray that his heart, freed from all burdens, may be filled with the fulness of joy.

I was comforted by the words of St Augustine, in the Office of this last week of the year, words which end his long series of sermons on the Fourth Gospel: and they are words we may understand as coming from this good priest, as he lays down his burdens:

I am now going to put down this book. You are going to go away, each one of you to his own home. To have been together in the same light has been good. To have been glad together has been good. To have rejoiced together has been good. But when we part from one another, let us not part from God.

