

“I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.”

The words of the Gospel we've heard are to be found in Jesus' last prayer before the Passion, in which we are given a very precious glimpse into his thinking at that tremendous threshold, the moment when he is preparing to die for us. He speaks of his being in a very specific place, one which is made vitally important by his coming to it. The place is surely the Cross, the place of sacrifice, which becomes the final place where Jesus will do the will of the Father on earth. He is praying that we should come to be with him in that place.

When we come to that place with Christ, he tells us that we shall see the glory the Father has given to his Son before ever the world came to be. This glory is the total gift of the divine love, which the Father pours out to the Son: it is his divine “begetting”, which makes him what he is. This gift is welcomed by the Son, and reciprocated by the total love of the Son for the Father; what passes between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, the divine life itself. God doesn't trade in little keepsakes or stocking-fillers. When God loves, he cannot give less than his whole being; the only limitation of God's gifts happens because of the poverty of our receiving.

We are praying tonight for the Catholic doctors of our diocese who have departed to be in that place where they will see the glory of God. Their passage to that place - and ours - was through the mystery of suffering and death. As doctors they spent their lives “going to that place” to accompany and to serve the people God placed in their care. We remember their ministry of healing with great reverence, because we know that they didn't stop at the physical boundaries of human healing; to do so would have been sad, because our power to heal in physical terms is so limited; they looked beyond those limits to a healing promised by Christ, which would flow from the hand of God in the kingdom of life. Because of their faith in that promise, their gift of limited earthly healing could be offered honestly and lovingly. In the humble awareness that our longing for life is deeper and greater than we can fulfil by any goodwill of ours, we accompany one another on the way of faith, praying that the promises of God will make good all that we cannot do.

The Nottingham Coroner spoke to the students at the University yesterday. One of his statements surprised me: he said that there is little training given in the Medical School to help doctors cope with the fact of death. I can remember the days when this used to be true of nurses, who felt that they should refer to a death on the ward as “losing a patient”; I believe that the marvellous spirit of the hospice movement has warmed and educated that attitude, so that nurses can come to believe that there is a good and worthy way to die, and that the care for the dying they can offer is not a doomed struggle leading to ultimate failure, but a caring process of accompanying, leading to a humane and peaceful completion of the journey. As Christians we can have far greater gifts to offer: the sense of generosity, which makes death a giving to God of our whole selves; the glorious gift of meaning, which makes death into an act of trust; and the poetry of the Christian mystery, where Jesus guides us, not into extinction, but into a birthday of eternal joy, the destiny for which we were always made, the fulness of our capacity to hope.

