

At night the angel of the Lord opened the prison gates, and said as he led them out:

Go and stand in the Temple, and tell the people all about this new life!

I never thought the Holy Father would die on an insignificant day. He didn't disappoint me. He died as the first vespers of the Octave-Day of Easter were celebrated in the churches and monasteries of Rome, having shared in his last Eucharist two hours earlier.

It is our special duty to pray for him this evening, and to recall the witness to Christ that he gave in his long and amazing life. Today's scripture gives us a Papal emblem: two keys with which to open this meditation.

The first is the angelic key which opens the prison door in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Every age has its themes and motifs, and the Church passes through many ages, like a ship trimming and responding to the currents and gales which she meets. Two centuries before the pontificate of John Paul II the word "liberty" had an awesome resonance, as the French Revolution bathed in blood the eldest daughter of the Church. The Pope of the day was so concerned to stem the tide of revolution that he almost parted company with the theme of liberation which lies at the heart of Jewish and Christian faith. "Liberty" was not a word much used in the Church, nor was Equality, and even Fraternity seemed impaired and crippled as a religious idea. I wonder with what words he would have expounded the story we heard tonight.

Karol Wojtyla was born in a little village, Wadowice, and his father was an administrator in the army, with the rank of sergeant. His mother, a school teacher, died when he was nine, and his brother left home to start training as a doctor. The two brothers were obviously more gifted than their parents intellectually. But this was of little significance, compared to the fact that, by the time he was twenty, the three other members of the little family were all dead, and Karol was alone in Krakow.

I personally know many people for whom this kind of devastation becomes a cause for a broken, half-lived life. Karol left school at the moment when his brother, the doctor, suddenly died, and his father was stricken with illness. Although Karol had enrolled in the Jagiellonian University, he left to be a labourer in a stone-quarry to try to augment the family funds. His father died a year later, and Karol tried to begin his studies, only to be overtaken by the German invasion of Poland and the Second World War. It was probably inevitable that he would turn his mind towards the Polish Church at this point. Already it was an independent centre of resistance and solace at every level of society. He moved his work into a Solvay chemical plant, and his piety was noticed by others. In 1942 he became a clandestine student for the priesthood in the Jagiellonian "Spiritual University", an early form of O U distance-learning. It is little known that, during this period, he suffered two road-accidents: a fractured skull when he was run down by a tram, and a near-fatal crushing by a driverless lorry: the last accident gave him stooped shoulders, an effect which worsened in his old age.

In all of this you can see a man who was being continually and progressively liberated, as he overcame and survived. The defeat of the Nazis brought the disastrous onset of Soviet sponsorship of Poland, and in the oppressive and unimaginative atmosphere of Iron Curtain communism he progressed to ordination, and to intensive further studies. He worked as a University Chaplain, in what must have been a most

formative period of his life, learning a capacity to relate to the young which never left him. I have met several people in England who were undergraduates during his chaplaincy, and they were all deeply marked by their community with him. It was there that he learned how the young are not phased or dismayed by being offered ideals of the highest sort. What they loathe and despise is being taught how to compromise and cobble together dishonourable fixes which lower the tone of life to squalor and dishonour. This is a lesson we in this country, not least in the Churches, might do well to learn.

After a brief career as a University teacher in ethics, the young priest was called by Paul VI to be auxiliary Bishop in Krakow, being 38 years old, and three years later on the death of his ordinary, he assumed the care of the Archdiocese, being confirmed as Archbishop eighteen months later. At the age of 44 he was created Cardinal.

To be a Bishop under a Soviet satellite regime was no picnic; but one gets the impression that Karol rather enjoyed the battle. Whilst Cardinal Wysinski was treading the political tightrope of Primacy, the somewhat maverick Archbishop of Krakow was giving a good impression of flexibility and communicability. He was learning to be a good listener, and this always helps to soften the lot of a hostage. In fact, it opened the doors of the Church's imprisonment, and the authorities found themselves, almost accidentally, liberating the eloquent and powerful personality of a young Cardinal. They can hardly have had the least idea of the consequences for them.

I like to remember two things about the young Karol. They are both to do with sport. The first is his lifelong love of mountains, and especially of skiing. As Pope his great consolation was his closeness to the Dolomites, and anyone who knows these astounding peaks will sympathise at once. They have the drama and poetry of the greatest landscapes on earth, and the experience of skiing amongst them is a sublime experience of freedom. The second is the more communitarian reputation of the little boy as the goalkeeper of his local football team. Lolek had big hands and wore huge gloves as well. His mates always knew that, when their defences were down, there was always Lolek waiting in the goal. Their situation would never be hopeless whilst those huge hands were still deployed in their cause.

A Pope has to be at home in high places. He occupies what Mikhail Gorbachev told his wife, as they walked together towards his anteroom in the Vatican, was "the pre-eminent moral authority of the earth", for good or ill the highest throne in Christendom. It is no place for vertigo. Nor may the Pope measure his attitudes by the performance of others. Peter was to *strengthen the faith of his brethren*, not simply to express his impression of what it was they believed. For this reason the Papacy will never be a mere mouthpiece of democratic process, or an obedient voice of consensus.

The Pope embodies our sense that Christ is with his Church: Christ frequently turned on his own followers, dismayed them with the depth of his demand, and at last dismissed them so that he would redeem them beyond their knowledge or understanding. In the first three Gospels we are scandalized by their abandonment of their Lord. In the Fourth Gospel he sends them away and gives himself to his captors; both the disciples' leaving him to his fate and the soldiers' taking him in charge become acts of obedience to Jesus' command. So it is that Jesus never answered any question of theirs by suggesting a heart-to-heart discussion, or the formation of a well-qualified committee. John Paul II knew that "I will be with you always" meant

something more than that. Even if the whole team let the opposition through, he was prepared to fall his length to save a goal. Even when they didn't know how to agree with him, the team instinctively applauded his courage and presence of mind.

John Paul the Pope had a mind that was complex and cultured. The reading of his encyclicals has been a minority pursuit, and many have been content to watch his career as a convenor of massive crowds, the supreme communicator. His way with young people has been a legend. They travelled to meet him in crowds of a million at a time. There is a Youth Day in Germany awaiting his successor, which will be in itself taken as a measure of that unfortunate man's stature. But his learning and theological acumen were both subordinated to the pastoral needs of his mission. The key concept of his papacy was that of the human person. How can we be human today? What does it take to be a human being in the world threatened by totalitarianism? He had tested himself against Nazism and Communism; he found himself in his last years squaring up to the hated power of materialism and the perils of a society that worshipped the individual and the individual's unfettered freedom. He knew from first-hand experience about poverty and lack of personal freedom. His travels only confirmed in him the sense of their horrors. But he saw very clearly the dangers of the consumerism of the West as it triumphed over dialectical materialism.

I was giving my name to a shopkeeper the other day. He looked at me severely and said, *I suppose you're a Catholic.* Yes, I said, I am. *Well,* he said, *I was brought up a Presbyterian, and I don't mind saying to your face that I think all this fuss about the Pope is a load of rubbish. He's only a man, after all.*

I couldn't agree more; and he has been a man all his life, with great courage and integrity. He kept his human tenderness, which in other men might have died. He kept his ideals which in other men might have been tarnished. He kept the faith when he was exhausted, and made to break stones, and injured, and robbed of his family. He moved heaven and earth to study and grow in his faith. He endured opposition and hardship positively as a priest and a Bishop. He took on the mantle of the Papacy which had crushed the life out of both of his predecessors, and wore it with courage and creativity for twenty-seven years, the last of which was an hourly contest with Parkinson's disease and his eighty-four-year-old physique. He wanted to cross the threshold of everyone on earth, and circled the earth twenty-seven times in his travels. He paid for his openness with the reception of an assassin's three bullets, and came back after three months with no impairment of his self-giving. He was still *only a man*. He suffered colonic cancer, and twice fell and fractured his bones as he struggled to work in his old age. He never accepted an old man's retreat. He took on the Papacy at an age when many a wise Western Churchman is beginning to monitor his blood-pressure with a view to early retirement. In his dying he has been *only a man*, with a fulness of faith, hope, and love which has shown all the world how to die. He has kept in his face the lineaments of a little child, who lost all those he loved, and refused to stop loving. In his high station on the human stage, he has shown a humility that was capable of grandeur, and a power that is poured out in love. He has made Christians everywhere think again about the nature of the Church, and perhaps see a value in a ministry which is personal, and central, and unique in its power and reach, whose dignity is drawn from its obedience to Christ. We may pray that he will hear at this ending of his life, *Well done, faithful servant of the Servants of God. Enter the joy of your Lord.*