

A THING FOR LENT

Time For Big Business

The exams are out of the way for a time. The new semester is bedding in. Christmas and the bulk of the winter are behind us. Time for a Spring Offensive!

...stirring Dull roots with spring rain....

What should Lent involve for a thoughtful Catholic? Its origins lie firmly in the ambit of Easter, which is the celebration of resurrection; so whatever else Lent is, it should be suitably radical. It is a matter of life and death, or, more accurately, death and life. I always find it a great paradox that we should, in the spring (*lent* is the Old English for *spring*) find ourselves turning our minds to a violent death, the crucifixion.

No two deaths are alike, because no two lives are identical. Nor is any death shared; we each have our own, and we are alone in it. The most powerful silencer I know is this thought about death: *we cannot accompany one another there*. It silences all our competence, all our courageous talk; no wise teacher can blow away this mystery, no trusted advisor teach me how to walk in this path. For the parent who suffers the death of a child, the given heart is broken with a clean stroke: *we were privileged to give you life, but we could not save you at last*. For the young who watch the death of the old, there is a poignant annunciation: *we accompanied you so far, but now you must go by yourself*.

The uniqueness of Jesus' death can be found in the world of *intentions*. An execution is not like a road-accident. It has its human reasons, its purposes. The death-sentence is conferred in an aura of justice: their verdict was, He *deserves* to die. The intentions of the condemned man must also be considered; Jesus did not find himself at hazard before the Sanhedrin by accident.

There is a cast of thousands, all aligned and implicated, one way or another, in the story of this dying. There are the obviously-involved: a squad of soldiers armed with lanterns and swords, hammers, nails, and a spear. There is a Roman Prefect washing his hands, vacillating in the seat of judgment. There is a synod of priests and lawyers meeting by night, tearing their robes in horror at this prisoner's words. But there are close friends running away, panicking, from the police in a dark garden, there is a man weeping uncontrollably as he walks through the gates of a palace, and there is another corpse hanging from another tree as the night falls, too deeply dishonoured to want a longer life. All of these, too, walked with Christ "in the park of death", each impelled by some different personal motive to be there. And there is the unknown mass of citizens and visitors, "the crowd", with its own powers and weaknesses, its proneness to manipulation, its vulnerability to infection, its willingness to be made a tool. In some sense, each of these actors in the story end by melting into the darkness: Judas by his plunge into oblivion, Pilate and Herod in their new-found alliance, the apostles in their scattered flight; some go weeping, some beating their breasts. The high priests and the Roman soldiers resume their uneasy journey together, walking in tandem towards the day when Jerusalem will perish in failed revolt, and the Temple will be razed, and the priestly plots will come to earth at last.

If we have died with him....

The concept of *dying with Christ* is mentioned before the crucifixion. Jesus speaks of those who "lose their lives for My sake" *finding their lives*. Peter says, as the Last Supper ends, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you"; a resolve greeted with grim contradiction from Jesus. Yet the Gospel has in reserve *the ones to whom places have been allotted, on his right hand and on his left, in his glory*: as he hangs near to death, where a criminal says: *We deserve to die for our misdeeds: but this man has done nothing wrong*. Priests and scribes found him deserving of death. His fellow-convicts announce his innocence.

Here Luke seems to obtrude a strange fellowship on the loneliness of the dying Jesus; in fact, this thief who seeks his friendship is the first person in the Gospel to address him simply by his unadorned personal name: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your*

kingdom. He is also the last human being to address Jesus in his earthly life, and the last human being he addresses: *Indeed I promise you, today you will be with me in Paradise*. It is a response of glorious unlikeliness, and its very incongruity carries the true timbre of Lent. This man would hardly claim he was "dying with Christ", in that he has admitted their deaths are different in meaning from his. But Jesus' promise of life *with him in Paradise* assures him that *Jesus is dying with him*.

It is perhaps this story which sets the concept free for us. *If we have died with him, then we shall live with him: if we hold firm, then we shall reign with him* can only mean anything if we can truly claim a share in his death. And this is what Lent must illuminate for us.

How can we die with Christ?

Death itself is already present in many familiar realities: in our cold heartedness, our sin, our despair, the grinding dead weight of sorrow which seems so senselessly to roll through the cosmos like some steam-roller out-of-control. To the eyes of faith, all of this can be seen as an experience of distance from God. When the world is at odds with its Creator, it loses its way, goes off-course. This is true in moral terms, but there is a deep wound in the nature of the world at large, which constantly shows itself in mysterious griefs and failures, disappointments and losses which strike out of a clear sky. It is not only moral evil that afflicts the world. We have all experienced the messages sent by death through such experiences and intermediaries, and we have seen others lose their lives, dying inwardly before their power.

When they lowered a paralysed man to him through the roof, Jesus' first words to him were *Your sins are forgiven*. He knew that *it was all one*. The gift of Christ was that he saw it all as one, shouldered all of it as one, and, like a team player going bravely for the ball, he said: *That's mine*. Lent is a time for seeking out the power of death in just this courageous way. You can do it in yourself, in the inner world where it lurks most intimately. Prayer is listening for God in the presence of death, in the loneliness and fear of a human heart, in the sanctuary of your life which no-one can enter except you and God. There you can find the resurrection.

You can do it in the lives of others, by going to them in the same spirit, listening to their pain, bearing their hardships, sharing their poverty. Almsgiving means becoming generous. It is quite possibly nothing to do with money: you have more precious things to give than that. In it you can sense the power of love in a way that is clear of selfishness, if you have found the kind of generosity that gives you little or nothing in return.

You can also find yourself near to Christ's death in the mysterious world of sacrifice, that strange and ancient path of self-deprivation. When people who are in hiding suddenly call for silence, and all strain their ears for a sound which will mean life or death, they show the way to what Christians seek in fasting. To attend to our *hunger* rather than to its satisfaction is a way unknown to the world of consumerism. But in it we experience the putting aside of good and beautiful things, in order to seek what is best and most beautiful, because even the least of our desires can lead us towards life, and eternal joy.