

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 reasons, its purposes. The death-sentence is conferred in an aura of justice: *their verdict was, He deserves to die*. Somehow, the intentions of the condemned man must be involved; 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 his 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 continue their uneasy journey, walking in tandem towards the day when Jerusalem will perish in its 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*. It is Peter who says, as the Last Supper ends,

“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you,” but this resolve is greeted with a 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, 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, the thief who seeks his friendship is the first person in the Gospel to address him simply by his name: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. He is also the last human being to address Jesus in his earthly life. *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. 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*