

John Mere Commemoration Sermon
“My death is made deare.”

St Bene't's Church, Cambridge, Low Tuesday 2022

‘My turning, my conversion, is to the crucified. His cross is my glory; with it my brow is signed, in it my mind rejoices, by it my life is directed, and my death is made dear.’ So wrote William of St Thierry, the 12th century Benedictine mystic and theologian who, in his later years, attracted by the reforms of Bernard of Clairvaux, became a Cistercian and embraced the life of contemplation.

And it is those words which frame our reflections this morning as we meet in this church dedicated to St Benedict, hallowed by the prayers of generations.

We meet today in accordance with instructions in the Will of John Mere and as I’m sure most of you know, the stipulations not only concern the subject of the sermon, but also its timing. The preacher may choose whether to preach on the Scriptures, on obedience, on charity, or to encourage ‘daily preparation against the fears of death’. My choice to preach on the latter has been somewhat inspired by the second half of the regulations: that this sermon be preached during Eastertide.

We are to enquire into how to prepare for death, and we are to do so in the days of Easter. Without wanting to overplay this connection, it must be significant, and given the way in which worship in this ancient building, and the places of worship across this city, will have been conducted at the time when Mere composed his Will, the connections between death and Easter will have been evident.

The ancient Roman breviary surrounds the psalms and canticles in these days with antiphons such as this one, from Lauds of Eastertide: ‘For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and coming, rolled back the stone and sat upon it. Alleluia. Alleluia.’ The Breviary of my own order is replete with similar paschal imagery. And those saying their prayers according to the Church of England’s current service book in these weeks of Eastertide have the option of beginning Morning Prayer daily with the *Pascha Nostrum*, the Easter Anthems, compiled by Thomas Cranmer as he edited the liturgy for the first Book of Common Prayer, which will have come into use in this city 10 years before John Mere died on Easter Wednesday 1558. That text reminds us daily: “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” In other words, language of death and resurrection would have permeated the stones of the holy places of Cambridge, before and after the Reformation made its influence known on the devotional life of the people who worshipped here.

And our worship this year is even more enriched with reminders of the importance of ‘daily preparation against the fears of death’ by the confluence of martyrs’ feasts this week. Yesterday we kept the feast of St Mark, and today, due to the idiosyncrasies of the calendar, is the transferred feast of St George, patron of this country, and martyr also. The blood of the martyrs glistens in the light of Easter, and further deepens John Mere’s request of us to think about these things.

St Benedict himself, in his Rule - a document which has arguably shaped Western Christianity in ways surpassed only by Scripture and the liturgy - exhorts his hearers and

readers to ‘yearn for everlasting life with holy desire. Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die.’¹ And in a sense that double instruction: to a yearning for the fulfilment of the promises of Easter, at the same time as recalling the attention to the fragility and temporality of life, is a summation of his entire Rule. We are people of the promise of the empty tomb, but we are people, also, living on this side of our own grave.

The three Benedictine vows are not quite the same as the evangelical counsels - poverty, chastity and obedience -, but they do much of the same work. Benedictines take vows of obedience, stability, and conversion of life (sometimes translated as conversion of heart, or of morals). And whilst most of us here do not live literally under such vows, the distinctive English spiritual tradition, drawing so deeply from the wellspring of Benedict, finds itself curiously content approaching our living and dying through these lenses nonetheless.

Perhaps the last two years of our experience has seen death rising up again once more into a more immediate level of consciousness too. We will gather here for this Mere commemoration, itself rescheduled twice due to the pandemic, in all likelihood a more battered and bruised collection of people than we would have been 24 months ago. Even if we have not had to bury a loved one under the heartbreakingly austere and stringent restrictions of lockdown, we will know someone close to us who has. For the clinically extremely vulnerable like me, the first few weeks, probably even the first few months of the first lockdown were frankly terrifying, and daily preparation against the fears of death really was a lived experience. We have become more aware in this generation that the chronophage marches on, munching up our tomorrows.

What wisdom might we find in the Benedictine tradition to help us honour John Mere’s bequest?

Stability is an extraordinary grace. In fact all three of the vows: stability, obedience and conversion of life are graces, because they reorient us, they turn us around and point us towards something certain, and they ground us in something objective as we make that journey. A monk or nun pledges their stability to the community for the rest of their life, and indeed beyond their mortal death. Thomas Merton, the great American Cistercian of the last century notes: ‘the cemetery is indeed a very important part of the community, and those in the cemetery still form part of the community: indeed, they are definitely “the community” - members with an eternal stability that can never be broken. Hence there should be great reverence and love for the cemetery and for those whose bodies rest there.’² Cistercian Monk Charles Cummings relates his Abbot’s habitual practice of taking a prospective postulant on a tour of the Abbey noting: if you get ill, here is the infirmary. When you die, here is the cemetery.³

Placing a high value on this type of Christian stability in our lives reminds us that our death has context. It is, of course, *our* death: particular, individual and quite possibly unwelcome. But it is a death within community. And there is a way in which the Church of England, wobbling and teetering though it may be, is still telling that story. We come to church through a graveyard, very often. We worship in buildings in which people are buried. Unlike a crematorium chapel which exists for only one purpose, our buildings are places in which the

¹ RB, Chapter 4.

² Thomas Merton, "Monastic Orientation" S5/23, CP, 77

³ Charles Cummings, *Monastic Practices*, Chapter 13.

manifold rites of passage of any given life take place: where, though this may be more romance than reality, it is at least conceivable that we may be baptised in the font, married at the chancel step, fed at the altar, and buried in the churchyard, and all surrounded by the same community which tells the story of our living and dying in the context of their living and dying, and in the light of the life and death and risen life of the Crucified. We are stabilised by recognising that our death takes place within a larger narrative, in which death is neither the defeat nor the end, but is both victory and continuity. In the words of the Church of England's most recent serious treatment of sickness, health and dying: 'our lives are lived towards the future.'⁴

Finding our stability, therefore, allows us to **convert** our lives or rather, because what I have just said is almost certainly heresy, finding our stability allows the Crucified Redeemer to begin to gently convert our lives. Our lives can be lived towards the Cross, in precisely the way in which William of St Thierry commends: 'My turning, my conversion, is to the crucified.'

A former Abbot of Westmalle relates an extraordinary account: 'Behind the altar on the east wall of the chapel of a Trappist monastery high up in the Rocky Mountains, on the right-hand side of a stained-glass window, there hangs a simple wooden cross. It will stay there until it is taken down to mark the grave of whichever monk is the next to die. Until then, it hangs on that wall so that whenever the monks turn and face the altar, they also turn and face this very simple and immediate symbol of their own death. Present therefore in their daily celebration of the Eucharist, and at the saying of their seven Offices is this reminder that death is part of life.'⁵

Converting our lives is the work of facing our own gravestone, but what rescues that statement from the morbid or even the macabre is that our gravestone is hanging next to the altar. There is an ecclesiology in this. The Daily Office recognises this every night at Compline. 'Awake we may watch with Christ: asleep we may rest in peace.'

The conversion of our lives is into the life of the one who is not only the crucified but also the risen. And thus our conversion takes place not simply in the stability of the tomb, but also of the garden. And our lives are being shaped for the divine. Our death is made dear because it is there that the trajectory of our conversion, buttressed by our stability, is pointing. There and beyond, as day by day in the 'school of the Lord's service'⁶ we pray, in the words of Aquinas, that 'what we thirst for soon our portion [may] be'⁷, and while we wait in that expectation, as 20th-century popular hymnody puts it, 'mirrored here may our lives tell your story.'⁸

Obedience is the third vow, and it is interesting that obedience is of the topics offered by John Mere in its own right. Lord Williams of Oystermouth, preaching this sermon 18 years ago, reminded us that Christian obedience 'is properly an obedience given where we see authority engaged with a truth beyond its own interest and horizon - ultimately with the truth of Christ.' The heart of Christian obedience, whether lived in a Religious community or

⁴ A Time to Heal.

⁵ Dom Ivo Dujardin, per. Con.

⁶ RB, Prologue.

⁷ Thee we adore, O hidden Saviour thee

⁸ Graham Kendrick, Shine Jesus shine.

otherwise, is a placing once again of our own ‘joys and ambitions’ in a proper relationship to Christ. Christ ‘became obedient for us even unto death’, Scripture reminds us, and so we recognise that there is a daily preparation against the fears of death in a well lived Christian life, because a well lived Christian life is cruciform. A well lived Christian life cannot but be Christological. A well lived Christian life turns to face both the altar and our own gravestone not out of morbidity or introspection, but because we would live for Christ. ‘I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings’ says the Apostle.

These three strands of obedience, conversion and stability weave in and out of each other in the life of faith because by choosing to be obedient, in the words of the baptism service to turn, submit, and come to Christ, involves taking on the voluntary obedience which models a life which not only holds gravestone and altar perpetually before us (though in their proper relationship), but - as a result - reveals our temporal existence as shot through with very distinct value and nobility.

Obedience is not slavery, nor is it unthinking. Obedience is not coercion because it is not achieved through fear and domination. We do well to remember that as we live out our temporal existence in the current global climate. Proper obedience, Christian obedience, is a choice to recognise that we exist in context: context which is *both* transient *and* noble; to make a voluntary renunciation – a little death - of some of our perceived autonomy. Obedience rebalances the system. Thomas Merton noted: ‘a monk who does not think of death... and see his own life objectively in the light of death, cannot be a true monk. His penance will be unbalanced, and his intentions will not be pure. His contemplation will be largely an illusion. His relations with his brothers and his whole life and outlook especially in his work, will be natural and vain.’⁹ And that observation is not far from the psalmist who reminds us each ninth evening in the 49th Psalm that man ‘shall carry nothing away with him when he dieth: neither shall his pomp follow him.’

The patron of this church reminds us early on in his Rule that we must ‘yearn for everlasting life with holy desire [and] Day by day remind [ourselves] that [we] are going to die.’¹⁰ John Mere asks us to do this during Eastertide, when perhaps most of all we can ‘perceive the fingerprints of our dying and rising God’¹¹. We see that the ancient monastic principles of stability, conversion, and obedience are a gift to the whole church - not just those who are enclosed or under vows - in our progress in this regard. For by them we are reoriented. By them we neither sidestep this important piece of formation, nor dilute our inevitable death into a more general pondering on mortality.

Rather than ignoring what is to come, attempting to ‘delay and outwit death’¹² or build for ourselves towering legacies so that all may remember us when we are gone, we find that our *stability* is in the communion of Christ’s family, living and departed, militant and expectant, in which we are both individual and member,

our life is a day-by-day turning towards cross and altar, a *conversion* into the image of the one whose death gives context to our death,

⁹ Thomas Merton xxxx

¹⁰ RB, Chapter 4.

¹¹ ATTH.

¹² Cummings xxx

and that voluntary renunciation, those little deaths, are in fact a joyful *obedience* to his call upon our lives, your life, my life so that 'My turning, my conversion, is to the crucified. His cross is my glory; with it my brow is signed, in it my mind rejoices, by it my life is directed, and my death is made dear.'

And so now to that Crucified and risen One, as to the Father and the Holy Ghost be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, dominion, honour, glory and power, now and to the ages of ages, and world without end. Amen.

God, who by the resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ has given us the victory, give you joy and peace in believing, and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen.