

A sermon preached at the Sung Eucharist by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on Sunday 12 October 2014 (the first Sunday of the academic year), in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

‘What’s Going on Here?’

Not many people know that Oscar Wilde, towards the end of the time he spent in Reading Prison, read the Gospels in Greek every day. In what became a book which was the fruit of that humiliating time in his life, *De Profundis*, Wilde wrote about Jesus. Not as a conventional believer would, but from his own utterly individual angle as an artist. He shows a monumental reverence, almost an attitude of worship towards Christ, which is all the more powerful for the way it can speak to those who would not count themselves as believers. He says this of Jesus: ‘His morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be. If the only thing that he ever said had been, “Her sins are forgiven her because she loved much,” it would have been worth while dying to have said it.’ Of the woman taken in adultery and the words, ‘Let him of you who has never sinned be the first to throw the stone at her,’ Wilde says ‘It was worth while living to have said that.’ He describes Jesus as ‘a lover for whose love the whole world was too small.’¹

Wilde describes Christ’s life as ‘the most wonderful of poems. For “pity and terror” there is nothing in the entire cycle of Greek tragedy to touch it.’ Not in Aeschylus, he says, nor in Dante, Shakespeare, nor ‘the whole of Celtic myth and legend ... is there anything that ... can be said to equal or even approach the last act of Christ’s passion.’ Describing the Last Supper, Christ’s betrayal, trial, crucifixion and burial, he turns to what is going on in this service, in the Eucharist or Mass. ‘When one contemplates all this from the point of view of art alone,’ Wilde wrote, ‘one cannot but be grateful that the supreme office of the church should be the playing of the tragedy without the shedding of blood: the mystical presentation, by means of dialogue and costume and gesture even, of the Passion of her Lord.’²

Fast-forward a hundred years, to the memoir of the modern Orkney poet George Mackay Brown, written late in his life. He describes the Eucharist or Mass as a way of entering ‘ritually, into the sufferings of peoples and nations.’ He admits that ‘most people nowadays will have nothing to do with that’; but nonetheless ‘Christ opened himself to the worst rejection, pain, and desolation’; and in the Mass, Brown says, ‘the sacrifice is repeated, over and over, every second of every day, all over the world; but Golgotha is made beautiful and meaningful by “the dance of the altar,” the offering of the fruit of people’s labour as they themselves journey to death, suffering and rejoicing: the bread and the wine.’ Just like Wilde, Brown says the story of Christ’s passion, the ‘matrix’ of this service, ‘is beyond the imaginative reach of Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy.’ He adds adventurously, ‘We ought to know, instinctively, that it *must* have happened that way.’³

To anyone coming into this service and asking, ‘What’s going on here?’ - Wilde and Brown give ancient and good answers. A Eucharist is a presentation, a playing out of the drama of Christ giving his life away for others. A drama of that kind resonates with almost everyone, in our time still, just as in the past. Those who might not accept the idea that Jesus was God in human form, seem no less drawn to revere such complete self-giving. Think of

¹ *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Ian Small, vol. II (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 181, 182, 175.

² Wilde, II, 174, 175.

³ George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing* (Edinburgh: Polygon edition, 2008), pp. 172-73.

the reaction, a week ago, to the death of Alan Henning, who went straight into danger to help others, and paid for it with his life. I think also of an immensely talented History don at this College, Ewen Green – who died far too young – and who would quote these words: ‘The purpose of life is to discover your gift; the meaning of life is to give it away.’ Ewen was not religious, but those words, which had deep resonance for him, go to the heart of what makes the poetry of Christ forever powerful. The mystery of self-giving strikes a chord in people, it gives us a hint why services like this seem to ride out every wave of politics and history, outlasting empires, nations and feared leaders. The ritual celebration of self-giving connects with something stronger than power as we know it; and with a wisdom wiser than cleverness.

To enter into a service like this is to do something countercultural, not least because of the countercultural person whose magnetism draws us, Jesus. We call him great, we call him Lord, Master, King; but his life stands apart from all the instruments we use to measure greatness.⁴ His life is a challenge to the assumptions we make about how to get on in the world; it’s a challenge to the false equations we make between privilege and entitlement, influence and integrity, acclaim and real success, power and worthwhile achievement. Some may say, you can see where his counterculturalism got him: look at the picture behind me, where he’s carrying the cross. All the same, in a little while we will take wafers of bread and a cup of wine, and repeat those words of his that have been repeated untold millions of times for two thousand years: ‘This is my body’ - ‘This is my blood.’ And it doesn’t stop there. We connect his sufferings with what George Mackay Brown calls ‘the sufferings of peoples and nations.’ And that makes the service a kind of summons, commissioning us too, to try and change the world, beginning with ourselves. Sending us out, to give our lives away as Jesus did, like that ‘lover for whose love the whole world was too small.’ Sending us out to live as if what he taught is really true: that the deepest self-giving brings the deepest fulfillment. That the way to know real joy is not by closing your hand to contain it, but by opening your hand and letting go.

Some of what he taught is hard, very hard. Many of his teachings go against the grain for us, certainly against the grain of our comfort. Some of his teachings are cryptic; they’ll take wrestling and critical thought if we’re to learn from them. That’s another answer, I hope, to the question, ‘What’s going on here?’ Reflection on holy wisdom. Encounter with scripture through the lens of critical intelligence. Openness to a God who often takes us where we would not necessarily choose to go. I don’t mean to make it sound like just another form of worthy drudgery. Think of it instead as an opportunity, official permission in the stretch of a busy week, to look at the puzzles and tangles of your life in a new way. Because refreshment is one of the other things that’s going on here.⁵ This is a well to drink from on the journey, it’s a place where the music of the Choir will lift you right out of yourself, where in one moment you are burdened by your struggles and perplexities; in the next you have forgotten all about them; and in the next you see them in a different light.

If you’re coming to these services as an unbeliever, you may want to ask: What about some of the things the Choir sings – what about the cries for mercy, the symbolic language about Christ being the Lamb of God for example? What about other things you wouldn’t sign your name to, maybe doctrines of the Creed? My advice is just to let them go, especially

⁴ Wilde says in *De Profundis* (p. 182): ‘He treated worldly success as a thing absolutely to be despised. He saw nothing in it at all.’

⁵ Brown says the Mass is ‘the wayside inn where we stay awhile for refreshment and rest’ (*For the Islands I Sing*, p. 173).

at the outset. Let them wash over you like a poem in a language you don't speak. Let the Choir sing them, let others recite them, don't force anything. They are attempts, incomplete and imperfect, to speak of a God who is true to us even when we are not true to him; a God who calls everyone to a feast and wants the hall to be filled with guests. They speak of a world which is waiting for you, if and when you feel ready to open another door – but the 'if' and the 'when' are for you to work out.