

## Sermon – Magdalen – Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2018

St. Luke's account of one of the first three miracles performed by Jesus during his ministry in Galilee has, like so many stories in both the Old and New Testaments, been depicted many times by artists. I can recall seeing two paintings and one carving of the Raising of the Son of the Widow of Nain (nowadays a small ruined hillside hamlet inhabited mostly by Muslims near Nazareth). None of these works of art would rival the most famous paintings of the weeping prophet, Jeremiah (source of the first reading) for instance the Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the great Rembrandt in the Rijksmuseum.

But the works inspired by St. Luke's story are all quite interesting in their own right – a 16<sup>th</sup> century altarpiece by Lucas Cranach in Wittenberg, the 10<sup>th</sup> century ivory Magdeburg panel in the British Museum and – my favourite – a late 19<sup>th</sup> century painting by Jacques Tissot in the Brooklyn Museum.

Tissot is an interesting artist, a genre painter of fashionable, elegantly dressed Parisian women. Late in life, Tissot “got God”, in a big way, and with his Catholic faith revived painted 365 scenes of the Life of Christ in watercolour over graphite. This technique gives some of them the look of black and white photographic images.

But this is not for me the main interest in this painting of the Nain miracle. In Tissot's painting Jesus, surrounded by a crowd, is holding out one of his hands to the boy who had died; the boy is pushing himself upright on the bier which is carrying him. It looks like a gymnastic push-up. The boy has a look of some surprise on his face. “Why me”, he could be saying.

He might well be surprised. After all, if he had later converted to become an early follower of Jesus, he would have believed as all Christians believe (and repeat regularly in the Creed) that we will rise again after death. But it is no part of Christian belief that we get a second innings of life on earth. We die first. Then we rise again. No wonder the young man was surprised.

Of course if surprise is remotely understandable in the context of what becomes of us after death, I assume we will be very surprised indeed. When I read History at this university some 50 years ago, we all had to study the Venerable Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English People", in which the author recalls that one of the counsellors of King Edwin of Northumbria compares the life of man to the rapid passage of a sparrow through a hall in winter. It flies into the warm hall from the cold weather outside and returns in a flash to the freezing storms beyond the walls. Where the sparrow came from and where exactly it is going are matters of which Bede notes we are utterly ignorant: thus, life and death.

I suppose that it is inevitable that the older one gets the more one is likely to brood on this unknown. Without being morbid, at my age I am well aware of being far nearer to the departure lounge than to the arrival gate. Some find that avoiding thinking about this subject at all is the best way of coping with it; and there is of course a carapace of taboos which can, up to a point, protect us from wondering about what death – sorry, let me try some euphemisms passing away or going to a better place – might really mean.

I may, at least at present, be unusual in this respect. I believe that since there is more to life than death, there is no reason to despair or panic. On the other hand, I confess to having no real idea of what this might mean except that it will be my lot and your own too. And if there is an element of fear in it, it is because of the notion of eternity. As Tom Stoppard wrote in his play "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead". "Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean where is it going to end?"

As for the nature of heaven and hell, well what is one to think? There is a great mural which covers an entire wall of the Southern Gothic cathedral in Albi; at the top there is the heavenly host looking devout in a rather po-faced way, below this regiment of saved souls devils drag and prod sinners into the terrible flames. This very colourful and explicit warning is the way that believers and would-be believers have been kept in line down the centuries.

What of such warnings today? I cannot recall the last time I heard a sermon on hell. Growing up, such sermons were a regular treat, often not very

different from the brimstone homily given in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man".

Pope Francis got into trouble with some clerical literalists recently by trying to move the argument about hell on from the traditionalists' fiery metaphors. I find thinking about his distinction between the consequences of turning towards, and turning away, from God more helpful than the attempt to make the old images literal. Yet naturally any such attempt to separate the treatment of the evil from good – Hitler for instance from Mother Teresa – runs straight into discussions on the limits of mercy and the gradation from venial to mortal, from black to white and back again.

In some ways I think it is more difficult to dig into the metaphors of heaven than into those of hell. Even my grand-children are now too old and smart to be convinced by a story of endless treats, football and Kit Kats. Eternity would consume an awful lot of Kit Kats.

I cannot really imagine much beyond the picture in St. Cyprian's third century sermon on our everlasting dwelling place in heaven, and conceivably we do not need to do so. "Who", Cyprian said "stationed in a foreign country would not want to return to their own country as soon as possible? We look upon paradise as our country and a great crowd of our loved ones waits us there. What joy both for them and for us to see one another and embrace".

So, and maybe it is a paradox, I imagine I will be much more surprised – like the boy in Tissot's painting – (if, as I said, the idea has any real meaning in the life beyond the grave) by what comes next and by what comes for ever, than by the fact that there really will be something there. This is not only because a belief in life after death is surely what Christ's own resurrection means.

The argument goes beyond that for me. My strong presumption about life after death is rooted in what Jacques Maritain believed was the very condition of life, namely the taking of perpetual risks. While nothing is more precious to us than life, we regularly and willingly take risks. We climb mountains, we drive cars too fast, we run across a busy road; we smoke cigarettes; we take

too little exercise; we get too fat. Death lies in ambush around every corner, as it did for the merchant's servant who fled from Baghdad to Samarra. Because we know deep down that death does not end everything, we run every sort of risk. The sense that we are immortal is part of our DNA. We can risk all now because we know that in our time, we too will be raised from the dead. As we say in the prayers for the dead, a funeral is only in the worldly sense the last rite. With a funeral service, the chant goes, "Vita mutator, non tollitur" – "Life is changed; life is not taken away". The surprised Widow's Son in Nain discovered that twice, the second time for ever. And perhaps what he discovered, as Bishop Michael Curry said during the recent royal wedding, and as Pope Francis said in his different way, is that love lasts for ever: love of others, love of God, or a rejection of God's love. Beyond that, I await the surprise.