

Sermon: Trinity V 2011

I was reflecting on the ecstatic funeral we held for Mollie last Tuesday. Obviously there was sadness in the occasion. Mollie was a wonderful servant of St Michael's and altogether lovable. And yet my abiding impression of her funeral was of a celebration and actually a scintillating triumph. And I'd like to look at some of the reasons why this should be.

Well to start with we had the incomparable words of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Let me remind you, the title of the rite in that book is refreshingly direct: *The Burial of the Dead*. Not like the mealy-mouthed, euphemistic titles in the modern prayer books where they call them *Funeral Services* – which only makes me think of customer services or financial services. The beginning of *The Burial of the Dead* is miraculous: a piece of liturgical theatre so daring, so risky, that it could fall flat and instead of being transcendental and awe-inspiring it could make us collapse into incredulity and mocking laughter.

Here comes the priest and the parish clerk leading a dead body and the first words the priest intones are *I am the resurrection and the life*. And what happens? The congregation to a man leaps to its feet with a movement so swift it verges on the violent. You see what is happening here: the whole congregation, standing up, is like a preview or a rehearsal for the general resurrection at the last day, when the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible - and the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed. Oh yes, don't forget that bit!

D'you know, I was once assisting at a funeral in a village church in Yorkshire and the priest did not begin with those terrifying, glorious words *I am the resurrection and the life*. He started by saying *Please stand*. As if they had to be told! When you hear that – well, it's almost a shriek – *I am the resurrection and the life* there is no choice: you rise to your feet out of sheer reflex.

Then there was the second miracle. The words *Thou knowest Lord the secrets of our hearts: shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer; but spare us Lord most holy O God most mighty; thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from thee*. Except we didn't just have the words. We had them to the surpassingly beautiful setting by Henry Purcell. This too is daring and risky. Surely anyone's ambition to set such words to music must border on the foolhardy. They are their own music. But Purcell dares it. And the result is that he actually improves the words. Purcell's funeral music is mankind's heartbreaking cry out of his greatest extremity and it also contains in it the echo of God's promise of mercy. Is there anything to compare with it in the whole of music? Maybe the end of *The St Matthew Passion*. Or perhaps the *Lachrymosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*.

This was followed by exhilarating music of a quite different character: *Laudate Dominum* from Mozart's *Vespers*. Here the soaring, extravagant soprano voice is the comfort of the angels – you might say a child's view of heaven.

Then the hymns – but such hymns! *O Strength and Stay upholding all creation*. This hymn has quite a pedigree. It was written more than 1600 years ago by St Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan. Ambrose was St Augustine's teacher – think of that! And what dazzling images:

The brightness of a holy deathbed blending with dawning glories of the eternal day.

What depth of poetic faith to combine a deathbed with the dawning glory of eternity. And how sensitively the words are matched by J.B. Dykes' evocative tune. In D-major – a bright key to suit the dawning glories. And the other hymn: *The day thou gavest Lord is ended*. And the worldwide solidarity of all mankind that it presents to us:

The sun that bids us rest is waking our brethren neath the western sky.

Words and tune together conjure the picture of the earth turning on its axis, dawn to dusk, night and day. And the lilting rhythm suggests a ship moving resolutely westwards with the declining sun.

And then we come to the words of the committal. Something very rare and extreme is going on here. Notice the electrifying simplicity. There is nothing too difficult here even for a member of General Synod. *Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live...in the midst of life we are in death*. And this is the truly remarkable thing about our faith: when it gets down to the nitty gritty, to the most serious and profound aspects of human experience, the Prayer Book restricts itself to words of one syllable. It's the same in *The Solemnisation of Matrimony* where we have *with this ring I thee wed*. It's the same in *Holy Baptism: I baptise thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost*. And supremely it's the same in *The Holy Communion: This is my Body....this is my Blood*.

And so this great service ends. But there are things just as important yet to come. Chief among these things is going out into the garden and eating and drinking together. This is the very centre of Christianity. We eat and we drink. At the wedding. At the funeral. At the Eucharist. You might say the clearest answer to the question *What do Christians do together* is *They eat and they drink*. At the most significant moments of our existence we scoff some grub and down some plonk. Or, if I may put that more theologically, we use the things of the earth to recreate in our hearts the eternal things of heaven.

Our new bell was sounded for Mollie, and I thought:

*Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away.
Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendrils and spray*

Clutch and cling?

Chill

Fingers of yew be curled

Down on us? After the kingfisher's wing

Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still

At the still point of the turning world.

So Mollie's funeral ended with that most spectacular family party in which we sat in the sunshine and comforted one another. We renewed old friendships and found new ones. We celebrated the life of our dear sister departed this life in the fear and nurture of the Lord. We laughed and made merry. We saw her off, not into the darkness but into the welcoming and receiving hands of the beautiful shepherd Jesus Christ

My dear people, there is no need to be afraid. In our Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, he would have told us. All this signifies that Christian people do not die alone. The death of each one of us is an experience shared – and dare I say it, celebrated - by the whole Christian community. Ah but it was put a lot better than that:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as a manor of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

But because we are all members of the church, the Bride of Christ, the funeral bell is also our wedding bell