

Fr Peter Newsam – Petworth & Midhurst – West Sussex

Homily for The Thirty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(10/11/19)

In today's Gospel the Sadducees ask a question. As is so often the case, this is not really a question designed to find out something, but to trap Jesus into saying something that can be used against him. It is designed to bring darkness rather than light. These battles of wits with the Lord never work, but they cannot stop themselves from trying. It does, at least, bring forth those beautiful words: 'He is God, not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all men are in fact alive.' And so he turns the trap into an opportunity for teaching, a way of leading us into a more profound consideration of the mystery of death.

This month is traditionally the time for us to pray for the dead, and to try to understand more fully what is the meaning of death and of eternal life. I thought, following the canonization of St John Henry Newman, that he might be our guide today. Fortunately, the saint offers us a beautiful meditation on the meaning of death in his poem *The Dream of Gerontius*.

Newman wrote his 'Dream' in 1865, and it begins with Gerontius aware that death is near. He is aware that gathered around his bed there are his friends, praying for him, and these prayers bring him great comfort:

*Rouse thee, my fainting soul, and play the man;
And through such waning span
Of life and thought as still has to be trod,
Prepare to meet thy God.*

As their voices drift and fade in his mind Gerontius does prepare to meet his God, and he does so by summing up his faith and trust in the one who made him. He speaks his personal profession of faith, throwing himself upon the one who he believes in, and says:

*Firmly I believe and truly,
God is three, and God is one...*

The hymn that we know as 'Firmly I believe and truly' is the profession of faith that Gerontius makes as death is at the door; it is his summary of all that is precious about the life that he knows is drawing to its close.

Gerontius hears again the voices of his friends praying for him, and then the voice of the priest commending him to God. He hangs now, teetering on the brink, life all behind, eternal life all ahead. As the voices of his friends begin to fade, he is aware that he is not, in fact alone. That just at this moment he is laid in the arms of love:

*Another marvel: some one has me fast
Within his ample palm; 'tis not a grasp
Such as they use on earth, but all around
Over the surface of my subtle being,
As though I were a sphere, and capable
To be accosted thus, a uniform
And gentle pressure tells me I am not
Self-moving, but borne forward on my way.*

The voice of his guardian angel sings of a job at last complete, and the angel guides Gerontius towards the presence of God, past the demons now so powerless to divert him. They pass, too, the

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choirs of angels whose voices encourage him on his way and introduce him to the outer reaches of God's presence with another song that is all too familiar to us: 'Praise to the holiest in the height'. Anxious about the judgement that lies ahead, the soul asks the angel to explain. The angel predicts that on coming into the presence of God Gerontius will be 'sick with love' and will yearn for the God who is before him, but at the same time will be so keenly aware of his own failings, his own feebleness of love, that he will want to slink away and hide.

*And these two pains, so counter and so keen,—
The longing for Him, when thou seest Him not;
The shame of self at thought of seeing Him,—
Will be thy veriest, sharpest purgatory.*

Rushing from the angels grasp Gerontius flings himself at the feet of the one who is love, but he is overpowered 'consumed yet quickened' by the love and holiness in front of him. He lies there motionless, but loved and safe. Gerontius is handed over to purgatory, where he can be washed and healed of his faults and failures, made ready at last to take his place in Heaven. In that place the love of God will slowly chip away all the resistance within him, all the unworthiness, all the sense that he has not been what he might have been, until he is ready, healed and revived, to take the place that was made ready for him before all time.

The poem is a fancy, of course. It is a saint trying to put into words something that cannot really be expressed, trying to tell as a story something that can never really be told. Our deaths are all so different, and we are not all lucky enough to have friends gathered around us, nor privileged to slip quietly and peacefully from this life to the next. People die in many different ways. But Newman wants to help us discover something more about the mystery of death. It is not a blank wall, an end. God is the God of the living, not the dead, and to him all are in fact alive, whether they live this side of death or the other. And Newman wants to remind us that the dead who we have loved, and also the dead that no-one loves, are not so very far from us. Their prayers for us can help us, just as ours can help them. The poem ends with the angel carrying the soul to the purifying waters of purgatory, where his healing is hastened and enhanced by the prayers of his friends.

*Softly and gently, dearly-ransom'd soul,
In my most loving arms I now enfold thee,
And, o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.*

*And carefully I dip thee in the lake,
And thou, without a sob or a resistance,
Dost through the flood thy rapid passage take,
Sinking deep, deeper, into the dim distance.*

*Angels, to whom the willing task is given,
Shall tend, and nurse, and lull thee, as thou
liest;
And masses on the earth, and prayers in heaven,
Shall aid thee at the Throne of the Most
Highest.*

*Farewell, but not for ever! brother dear,
Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;
Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
And I will come and wake thee on the morrow.*