

Love among the Ruins
Requiem Mass for All Souls
Bristol Cathedral 1 Nov 2020

I wonder if you have seen photographs of the city of Idlib in Syria devastated by bombing? Whole blocks of flats have been reduced to rubble and whole streets were flattened.

Photographs of the Bristol Blitz, extensive bombing that took place on 2 November 1940 show similar scenes, when dozens of houses in Park Street were smashed to dust and the street scape obliterated.

Looking at these photographs you can no longer recognise the landmarks, once familiar streetscapes become alien and unfamiliar.

Bereavement can do the same to us.
We feel unsighted, lost,
and that life lacks the sign posts
that help us to orientate ourselves.
Suddenly we are no longer sure what to do,
where we should be,
even who we are,
when the one we love is no longer there to relate to.

This is the landscape into which God comes,
at first as a child born into poverty,
born among the devastation
of a world distorted by sin,
born to rebuild hope in a world of despair.

This theme is reflected in a number of Renaissance nativity scenes, though you may not notice it.
If you look closely at the background to Durer's Adoration of the Magi, for example,

you will see that the stable is set among ruined classical pillars and crumbling walls. In an unfinished painting of the same scene by Leonardo the background also shows the devastation of warfare that will be replaced by the peaceable kingdom heralded by the birth of Christ. These artists tell us that this birth takes place in a broken world, This child has come to heal that world.

At the end of his life, we will see Jesus once again located in a landscape of devastation as he is crucified on the great rubbish heap outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Even today this spot is littered with the crumbling stones of the city walls destroyed by repeated invasion over the centuries.

The writer of Lamentations,

this poet of pain, was devastated by the destruction of his city. He had seen the walls of Jerusalem torn down by invading armies and the familiar landmarks destroyed. He is homeless, perhaps literally, but certainly spiritually – the temple, the spiritual home of God's people lies in ruins.

We can recognise these feelings. It is not just that we have experienced bereavement when we lose a loved one. We know the bereavement of lost opportunities, lost ambitions, lost hopes. Perhaps you have lost a job, lost your home, lost your country at some time in your life. Closely aligned with that bereavement is the feeling of fear – the fear of losing our life, yes, but the fear of all those other little losses too; the loss of dignity, the loss of control, the loss of identity.

How do we learn to live with the fear of loss
without being destroyed by it?

Firstly, we do not deny it.

When we stare death in the face it loses its power
over us.

Death is inevitable, it will come, we cannot
escape it.

Even God handed his only Son over to death.

But we can turn from the darkness to the light,
turn inward towards the spark of life that is never
extinguished, that continues to burn with the
love of God.

Another poet, John O'Donohue, who himself died
at the age of 52,

is one of the great modern writers on death.

He tells us that when we overcome our fear,
death will be a meeting with a lifelong friend,
with our true self,
uncorrupted by fear.

Each day is a day on the journey towards a
horizon,

beyond that horizon

lies the deepest source of our life,

the place where we will behold

the beauty and light of the eternal.

Perhaps you have experienced the dawn in a
place where you can see the light as it surfaces
on the horizon.

You sense the darkness lifting at first

and you might hear the birds begin their chorus.

Then the miracle happens

and the faintest glimmer of gold or pink shows
itself.

The poet tells that the mercy of God dawns
afresh with each new day, like that rosy dawn. He
reminds us that the steadfast love of God never
ceases.

When we cling to that remembrance,
when we listen to our own soul whisper,
The Lord is my portion,
therefore I will hope in him,
we may find the strength to stand among the
ruins and look for the pale rosy glimmer of dawn.

Each day is a gift,
the life we are given is gift,
let us live each day until we die,
living in the hope of eternity,
living in the hope of salvation.
Salvation from fear,
salvation from separation,
salvation from death.

The poet gives us good advice,
wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

In this time of great uncertainty many of our
familiar rituals are denied us.

For the past nine months,
those who have been bereaved have endured
funerals with very few mourners, with spatial
distancing,
with no opportunity to sing out our pain.
With no clear road map or plan we cannot see
when memorial services, family gatherings,
or even our national commemorations will be
possible again.
We can see that this anxiety leads to agitation
and frustration, or to a listless despair.

But the poet says, wait quietly.

Remember that God does not willingly afflict us,
this pandemic is not the punishment inflicted by
a capricious deity,
neither is it the result of a conspiracy of human
evil. Nature takes its course and we suffer.
We suffer because we love,
but we will not suffer for ever.

Whether the folk on your heart today have died recently, whether they died of Covid or something else, whether they died many years ago, they are not lost for ever.

Jesus promises his friends, you will not be lost, there is a final destination over the horizon, and we are all on the journey to that destination, where we will be enfolded in light, peace, joy and love.

May you be blessed by the light that comes in the morning, May you be strengthened to find love among the ruins.

Amen