

Crossing the Bar

York Minster - Sunday After Ascension

Sunday May 4th 2008

Last Wednesday I went to see Jane. It was not something I was looking forward to, since I knew she was terminally ill with cancer. She is well on in years and her husband has been a faithful servant of Wakefield Diocese as he still is. Expecting to encounter a recumbent soul, pallid, drawn and semi-conscious, I was brought up with a jolt. Jane was sitting up in bed and had a good colour. She had a determined look on her face and was mid-way through a business-like conversation on the telephone. 'Ah', she said. 'Can't talk now – on to my daughter in New Zealand.' We chatted for a moment. 'How are you?' I asked rather lamely. 'Well, I'm on the way out! But I'm sorting things out with God and then I can get on with other things.'

It was, as they say, a very Yorkshire conversation – no messing and to the point. Despite the extreme situation, there was a certain humour. Jane intended that. She'd got me on the run, and I wouldn't awfully much have wanted to be in God's position. He was about to get a good talking to as well. Jane knows that she is standing very close to a frontier, a border, a boundary. But her attitude to this mortal frontier is clear and certain. She is in no doubt of the situation. As she said: 'She's on the way out.' Ascensiontide is, amongst other things, about frontiers. It is a liminal moment, as the anthropologists would say, a moment when a threshold, and in this case a momentous threshold, is to be crossed. Jesus stands with his disciples and, before them all, is taken from their sight. It is, perhaps, the sharpest and most poignant moment in the narrative of Jesus as told by Luke. Indeed, Luke is unique in telling it in this way. It is all the sharper since it is such a human moment, as we saw in Jane's response: Putting it bluntly as she did: 'I'm on the way out.'

The classical expression of this crossing of the final in the nineteenth century was Alfred Tennyson's poem, *Crossing the Bar*, written as he returned home one evening to Farringford on the Lymington-Yarmouth ferry:

'Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call to me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.'

Tennyson wrote at time of doubt and uncertainty in Victorian England. He vividly captured it in his own great elegy *In Memoriam*. Here he is more hopeful. The final stanza returns to a full blaze of faith:

'I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.'

Here as we stand at the moment when Jesus himself disappears from mortal sight, St John, from whose gospel we heard, captures it very differently. For him it is about glory: 'Glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee.' Still, however, the threshold looms clear: 'Father, the hour has come.... now I am no longer in the world and I am coming to thee.' For St John, crucifixion, death, resurrection and ascension are all of a piece. As we read elsewhere in John's account. 'I, if I be lifted up from the world,

will draw all people to me.’ Lifting up is everything in one. Part of the glory is the drawing of all to him as the Spirit, the Advocate is outpoured.

When the anthropologists talk of liminality, of the crossing of thresholds, they talk of change. Crossing a threshold means that things will never be quite the same again. It is a fact of human experience. Those who marry have their life changed. Losing a partner or loved one too is an irreversible experience. This is why the remarkable events of Easter form an objective and pivotal point in the Christian life. In Jesus, God accepts all that humanity projects upon him. Jesus’ crossing of the bar, of the threshold changes things for all people and for all time.

In a poem, very different from Tennyson’s but equally powerful and telling, this time from the twentieth century, Cecil Day Lewis deepens our understanding further. He has taken his son to boarding school and wistfully says goodbye:

‘.....I can see
You walking away from me towards the school.....
.....That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.’

This moment in the story of salvation is as telling as any other if not more, as Jesus moves out beyond our mortal threshold, on the way out. But it is a crucial moment for salvation. It is a fearful and perhaps confusing moment but with it comes the promise of a future glory. It is not that Jesus abandons us but that we must now live by faith and hope, in this power of his Spirit. I can put it no better than the poet:

‘Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away
And love is proved in the letting go.’

Amen

READINGS

Acts 1: 6-14

John 17: 1-11