



Br Adrian for 3rd Sunday before Advent (2020)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Gospel reading for today speaks of the 10 bridesmaids, 5 foolish, 5 wise and having enough oil for the lamps to keep them burning until the Lords arrival. It reminds me of that other reading in the Gospel about keeping our lamps lit, and of that oil, it can represent many things but today I wish to start with the oil representing faith and the light being that of hope in the love of God.

We do not always observe remembrance Sunday in full here at Mucknell, however, in the unsettled, some may say hopeless age in which we are living through, the experiences of those suffering through the world wars may have something to say and some wisdom to share for the maintenance of that hope in the face of such evil and hopelessness.

I'm first put in mind of some poetry, I could present to you Wilfred Owen's Dulce et Decorum est to set the scene of horror that we are dealing with but will instead provide a brief resume before moving on to the poem in Flanders fields. Wilfred in his poem presents the shear horror of the trenches in the light of a Chlorine Gas attack, the shear panic, the mayhem, the rushing to get masks on, the one who couldn't, the one who struggled, fell, drowned on his own lungs. The horror, the death, the stench, nothing brings such evil and chaos more home than the poem Dulce et Decorum est, the phrase which rings with awful irony as it cannot be sweet nor fitting to die for ones country in such circumstances. Often war is declared, people kill themselves in the name of God and yet the prophets cry out Not in my Name (referring to God), he calls for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Indeed, I think it is Hosea who cries out I desire mercy, not sacrifice and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. God suffered alongside us then, he suffers alongside us now.

I now come to the poem in Flanders Fields by John McCrae, a poem composed after burying a fellow soldier.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

I chose this poem because in spite of the death and the sheer futility of it all there is never the less still the larks bravely singing. There is a sense that in amongst futility and human error there is yet through and beyond a beauty, a hope that hasn't been extinguished. That in the horror of Gas attacks, in the horror of walking out with pistols to the sound of machine gun fire beauty remains. It is this looking beyond our current trials to that vision of the resurrection and its signs in our current times that keeps our lamps lit. I'm taken to the song of songs, where the bride runs over the hills, through the meadows and into valleys looking for and following her bridegroom's scent with her bridesmaids following after, and it is the sense of movement in the song that gives rise to the growing desire, the ardour, for her Lord, that scent of hope, that oil of gladness, the balm of gratitude and such joys no matter how small were still present in those dirty, death and rat infested trenches as they are in our world today. A brother once went to his Abbot, he spoke of trials in his relationships in community and how much of it he took on himself but also of the signs of fresh growth and of budding in those relationships, and the Abbot responded, such will always happen in community and people are not always receptive but it is the growing in attentiveness to the opportunities for such budding when they arise and being brave enough to act on them and learning about the other through them that is important. Trials are always there but so is the lark singing and we need to get better at noticing the little lark beyond as well as if not more than the trials that weigh us down in front of our noses. It is in such little signs of gratitude our lamps remain lit and our desire for God increases. We must not forget our trials for they too can lead us deeper into the mysteries of ourselves and God but these need to be born with patiently in confession to our mentor and in prayer to God. It is through prayer, compassion and gratitude, living in companionship with care for one another, a Eucharistic community where each grows into the knowledge and wisdom that God loves us that keeps our lamps lit

The fear of death, however, can be strong, the psalmist speaks of the struggle I spoke of above:

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“LORD, save me!”
The LORD is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The LORD protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return to your rest, my soul,
for the LORD has been good to you.

It is a struggle we all face daily the struggle between our fears, anxieties, wounds and the need for peace and love and that genuine cry of Lord Have mercy on me or Lord save me is the cry that the suffering God hears and God comforts us.

It brings to mind another image, that of the Jews in the concentration camps. Having their external identity taken from them and a lot of their interior identity suppressed and yet there are tales of turning barrels upside down to form alters, the lighting of candles, the singing of psalms, even in this degrading state with the reality of death so close at hand, the hope for the redemption of Israel was not completely lost and prayers fervently went to God. Stuart showed me a picture the other day, it had ships being tossed about in stormy waters with anchors that were just scattered around not providing any anchorage. These times can often feel like that but there is a hope that lies beyond what we can imagine and see with our own eyes, one that exists even in the presence of despair and in the confused times we live in, that provides safe anchorage and rest for our souls. We need to again look beyond the dissonance of our individualism to the God who still loves us and is speaking to us if we only have the ears to hear him, that justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

The Monastic tradition of which we are a part has much wisdom that can aid us in our finding of such harbours of less choppy waters, the stability, the staying together to form a community encourages the long work of the growth of love and looking to God in mercy, the regular pattern of the day keeps returning our gaze away from our strife to God who is our anchorage, if we are prepared to turn and listen to it. Going deeper into that life of prayer and the stability it offers has a lot to say for wider society as it grapples with the troubles of our time where community has been weakened, where guidance for the individual is relative, where what once was sure seems to be no longer. Let us continue to join them in that struggle and grow together more in our life of prayer and growth of

compassion and being centred on the sure foundation of Christ we can become a beacon that will be ready and lit when, as St Paul says in his first letter to the Thessalonians “the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”
Amen.