Good Friday

It matters how we die. And how we die depends upon how we approach dying. How we approach that inevitability depends upon how we have lived. How we live depends upon how much we have learned love.

In many wisdom traditions death is associated with a crisis – the word *krisis* means judgement. A reckoning has to be made and, like doing tax returns, no one looks forward to it but it is not as bad as it seems once you set your mind to it. The more complicated your affairs, the longer it will take. But unlike tax returns you cannot pay anyone to do it for you. Dying, we all become hermits and if we haven’t understood solitude before we will learn in this last crisis of life.

The Egyptians saw the last judgement as a weighing of the human heart against the feather of truth. If the heart of the deceased was too heavy, too impure, the goddess of truth would devour it and the unfortunate soul would be arrested on its journey into immortality, stuck in some intermediate limbo or netherworld.

So, scared of the unknown afterlife, people used to pray for a holy death. This meant letting go of life and one’s attachments and loved ones peacefully. Even when pain was acute one could achieve a dignified equanimity, no thrashing around dramatically complaining about that ‘dark night’ which the romantic poet Dylan Thomas said we should not go gently into. Rather, he said we should, ‘rage against the fading of the light’. But beside the witness of a holy death this sounds embarrassingly adolescent.

What about Good Friday in the middle of this pandemic in which so many have died, and which will take away many others before it has run its course? If we have been following Lent – and what a Lent it has been in 2020 – we should be a little readier to look death in the eyes and face our deepest fear. When fears are faced, they crumble. It is only when we run away that they become monstrous and wreck our lives and our capacity to love.

Even the death of the unjustly accused, of children, victims of genocide or of social inequality (as we see in the figures of Covid 19’s victims), even the most disturbing deaths teach us about life. Yama the mythical god of death in the Katha Upanishad is a teacher of humanity. So is the fully human, historical Jesus, not only in what he preached but in how he lived and died into his teaching, indeed becoming what he taught. If we die as we lived, our dying is a gift, an authentic teaching in itself, to those we take leave of. Even in grief we can feel the grace of a holy death and its joyful, birth-like expansion and release. Every death, Jesus shows us, can be redemptive.

He did not rage against the fading of the light. He saw the rising light. Spoken from this incommunicable awakening, his last words enlighten us: *I am thirsty*. *Today you will be with me in paradise. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. It is accomplished.*

Holy Saturday

Family or loved ones waiting beside someone on life support or - as in the corona crisis – not allowed to be beside them but waiting for news at a distance – as long as there is breath there is hope. However close the inevitable may be, it is another age, another world away. But when it comes, and the last breath is drawn, when there is no next inbreath, we enter the *summum silentium* of death. The great silence.

In monasteries this refers to the silence monks are supposed to observe strictly after the night prayer. It’s not unknown, however, for monks to get on zoom or chat with someone in the community after the great silence. With death, however, there is no choice, silence can only be observed. We can’t cheat death. And it is shocking how powerless we are. Like children who think they can get what they want by insisting, by charming, by crying, by threatening, we finally give up and admit we are defeated. What is gone is gone.

However much we replay conversations with the dead we will never again hear or see them as we did. Photos, old letters, personal objects we treasure are all meagre consolation and after a while they become impediments to the new relationship that is being formed in the tomb that slowly evolves to become a womb.

The unyielding, uncompromising silence of non-communication, the failure to make contact, to know what the dead person might be seeing or feeling – if anything. The silence of wondering if they care – if they are anywhere or in any kind of existence in which they could care about those who miss them. Eventually the grieving process allows the bereft to accept the obvious and the inevitable. Albeit with another weight in their heavy heart to carry, they move on. As we die into the death the *summum silentium* shows signs of life. Green shoots from dead soil.

This doesn’t mean that messages from the dead are getting through on a busy network but that the silence becomes deeper. We become better able to listen to the silence without populating it with our desires and fears and imagination. It becomes simple presence. Simple but more intensely present than anything we thought was real before.

Inbetween the lines of this pandemic and the painful, not meaningless disruption it is causing, we should be able to hear this great silence. If we don’t have one, or if it has fallen into disrepair, this is the time to start or re-service a spiritual practice. It is time to see how necessary for survival is the silence of things. The silence which empowers life through death.

Here at Bonnevaux I have noticed on my walks how much more present and friendly the birds and animals seem. I imagine this is my projection. It is I who have changed, not them. But who knows? Maybe it is after all, all about relationship, not just observation or being observed. It is time to start Lent again.