

“When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then said he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.”

Sermon for the Requiem of Petronella Neish

St George's Round Church

December 6th 2011 at 10 am

Forsaken on his cross, Our Lord Jesus, in the desolation of his tortured death, makes homes for us. For the thief, crucified beside him, he makes real the promise of a home with his heavenly Father. The Son of God had declared “In my Father's house are many mansions ... I go to prepare a place for you.”¹ Now, to the prayer of the penitent sinner, “Lord, remember me when you come into thy kingdom”, Jesus opens the door of our homeland: “Verily I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.”²

For his mother, the Son of Mary, hoisted up for mockery and death beyond embrace or caress, makes an earthly home: “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said to his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then said he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.”³ Here, now, we offer the Holy Sacrifice in confident hope that the sufferings and death of the God-man will bear home another mother, our beloved Petronella.

No one took up the home making of the Son of God and of Mary more totally, carefully, happily, and with greater blessing than she. For Gordon, for each of their children, and for neighbours, friends, parishioners, strays of every kind, animal and human, high and low, for all and sundry, who came within her walls and her reach, Nellie built an habitation of God among men. And she built this home in such a way that none of us who entered it through her will ever leave it. As I visited her and her family during the weeks of her passing, the permanence of her home making became manifest. How she built so well appears when we return to Jesus and the tiny group clinging together at the foot of his cross. There we find Mary and “the disciple whom he loved,” “who also leaned on Jesus' breast” during his last supper with his followers.⁴ To take his place, Jesus makes his most intimate friend Mary's son, and Mary he makes John's mother, so that “from that hour this disciple took her unto his own home.”⁵ Jesus mirrors himself in two loves, the love of a son and the love of a mother. Remember his cry:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings.⁶

¹ John 14.2.

² Luke 23.42-43.

³ St John 19.26-27.

⁴ John 21. 20.

⁵ John 19.27.

⁶ Matthew 23:37.

Intimate friendships, with their need and desire for self-sacrifice, for putting ourselves in the other's place, and for finding ourselves through ecstatic self-giving, shine as revealing lights in the Jewish, Hellenic, and Christian tradition from which our faith comes. They show the union of loving substitution, mirrored self-knowledge, and death as our way home to God. The stories of the great lovers prick our hearts and illumine our minds: Ruth and Naomi, David and Absalom, Jonathan and David, Achilles and Patroclus, Socrates and Alcibiades, Jesus and John.

Ruth said to Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."⁷

Socrates declared to Alcibiades: "I am the only friend who has never left you because I was the only lover of you, the rest were lovers only of what was yours.... [I am sent by God to bring you to self-knowledge]. If your soul, my dear Alcibiades, is to know herself, she must see ... her highest part, the spring of her virtue [mirrored in another] ... [There she will see what of herself] resembles God. Whoever looks at this, and comes to know all that is divine, will gain thereby the best knowledge of himself."⁸

Achilles wept: "My dear friend has perished, Patroclus, whom I loved beyond all my companions, as well as my own life ... and now I must die soon because I was not there to stand beside my friend when he was killed."⁹

David was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"¹⁰

Jesus said: "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends."¹¹

What these great loves reveal of the way to God comes out in the wrenchingly terrible story of an intimate friendship of St Augustine told in his *Confessions*. It unites homecoming, substitution, mirrored self-knowledge and death.

Worldly ambitions, his mother's, his father's, and, from them, his own, drove Augustine away from his home to the big city, Carthage, that seething caldron of lust, to study. He was sent off unbaptised lest the rigorous requirements of Christian life should keep him from getting ahead. He returns home as a teacher, still unbaptised, and having picked up an heretical Christianity along with

⁷ Ruth 1.16-17.

⁸ *Alcibiades Major* 132A-133D.

⁹ *Iliad* 18.

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 18.33.

¹¹ John 15.12-14.

his education and his climb up the greasy ladder of success. Back in the small town where he was born, Augustine spends a year in “the sweet experience” of a fervent friendship with a childhood companion, but uses his city sophistication to corrupt his friend’s mind. The friend falls mortally ill and is baptised while in a coma. When he returns to consciousness, Augustine mocks the sacrament the friend had received, but finds to his horror that its power is stronger than his. Before dying, the friend frankly tells Augustine that further mockery of the sacrament would make them enemies.¹²

Augustine’s grief at his friend’s death tears him apart. Because of how he knew himself, and, thus, his friend, and himself through his friend, his misery is inconsolable. Augustine tells us that his friend was his other self, his double.¹³ Thus, without a true knowledge of who his friend was, he could not have a true understanding of himself, and without a true knowledge of himself, he could not rightly know and love his friend. Augustine confesses “my error became my God” and “I became a vast problem to myself.”¹⁴ He lost the will to live:

I had felt that my soul and his soul were one soul in two bodies. So my life was a horror to me. I did not wish to live with only half of myself, and perhaps the reason I so much feared death was that then the whole of my much loved friend would have died.¹⁵

Augustine’s error was to conceive all reality as nothing but bodies in their ever changing flux. He was ignorant that spirit is the substantial, the true being, and that changeless eternity is the foundation of all reality. He was ignorant of spirit, of the immortality of the soul, and of the eternity of God. So he had given infinite love to someone who must, like himself, just vanish:

The reason why grief penetrated me so easily and so deeply was that I had poured out my soul on to the sand by loving a person sure to die as if he would never die.¹⁶

Without the true knowledge of God and of self, all self-giving love is an invitation to quenchless despair.

After a long and difficult journey, Augustine comes to know himself and his friends in God. He confesses:

Happy is the person who loves you, and his friend through you, and his enemy because of you. Though left alone, he loses none dear to him; for all are dear in the one who cannot be lost. Who is that but our God, the God

¹² *Confessions* 4.4.

¹³ *Confessions* 4.6.11: “ille alter eram”.

¹⁴ *Confessions* 4.4.9: “Factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio” & 4.7.12 “error meus erat deus meus.”

¹⁵ *Confessions* 4.6.11.

¹⁶ *Confessions* 4.7.12.

who made heaven and earth and filled them? By filling them he made them. None loses you unless he abandons you.¹⁷

For the world out of which our religion rises to us, the fundamental requirement for home coming is self-knowledge. We must come to know ourselves in God and for God. For us, who see through a mirror darkly, the only means of true self-knowledge is to see ourselves mirrored in the beloved other, the one whom love has made our friend.

We must know who we are and from whence we come. This is not a knowledge of our family trees or of our social status. This is for me to know what kind of being I am; for each of us to know what kind of beings we are. Nellie was one of God's homemakers because she gave us true knowledge of ourselves. Socrates teaches Alcibiades that when he sees himself mirrored in the best part of the soul of a true lover, he sees himself in God. When we looked into Nellie's eyes, and saw ourselves through what she saw in us and loved in us, we knew what kind of beings we are. The Catechism asks "Who gave you your name?" and gives Nellie's answer. Nellie saw each one as "a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven."¹⁸ She made us at home in our Father's kingdom of which her house was an outpost. This is how she built a home for each of us. And the home she made for each of us is one that, having entered it through her, we shall never leave. She gave us true knowledge of the immortal creatures we are, made for God's eternal peace.

The journeys of the saints are stories of the loss of memory and of the gracious restoration of their minds' good; our lives are stories of forgetfulness of our nature, and of our coming again to know ourselves as members of the kingdom of immortal spirit. The saints have left us deathless paths by which we can travel God's road from self-oblivion to knowledge of ourselves as children of God, prodigal sons who forsook our Father's home but who will return to him again. In mind, in word, and in deed, each of us repeats the journey over and over again; some of us everyday! And we shall keep on forgetting. But our priceless treasure is that we have been given, and have deeply learned from loving gaze, from welcoming embrace, and from untiring devotion, the truth that we can always return home. That is God's gift to us in Jesus through Nellie.

"When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said to his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then said he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." As she did, we pray now for her and for ourselves, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom"; for Nellie we confidently expect the response of the Son of Mary, the Mother of God: "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise."

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¹⁷ *Confessions* 4.9.14.

¹⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, Canada 1962, 544.