

FISHER MASS 1 MAY 2017

Revelation 7:9-17 They have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb

Romans 8:31-39 Who shall condemn?

John 10:11-16 No one takes it from me, I lay it down of myself

Our first reading puts before us a daring evocation of the afterlife. It conveys a sense of the majesty of God and of the establishment of praise that works to make that majesty explicit. Angels and elders and celestial beasts form a choir of strange polyphonies. They chant words of benediction, raising up towards God the highest notions accessible to human vocabulary. When you think about it, it is strange: positioned before the face of God, passed at last from faith to vision, why should anyone feel the need to say anything? Is beatitude, then, not a state of silent rapture? It is good to have any too static ideas of bliss challenged by Scripture itself, based on an ancient account of who God is, who we are. When, on the sixth day, God created man, the task given to Adam was not just to look about him and admire, but to speak. The created universe, formally perfect, was incomplete until man had named its constituent parts. It is one of the most remarkable verses in the Bible: 'the Lord God brought [every beast of the earth, every fowl of the air] to Adam to see what he would call them.' God almighty, all-knowing, *chose* not to know what his works would be called. He entrusted their naming to Adam, confident that Adam would recognise each creature for what it was in truth, then find a way of speaking what he knew. Do we appreciate the degree of trust this presupposes? Imagine you're an artist sure of having painted, at last, a canvas destined to endure. Imagine you're an author having laboured for years on a book that expresses your highest thoughts in their purest form. Would you, on finishing your work, say to another, 'Come up with a name, would you?' Would you sufficiently trust even your wife, your husband, the person who, on this earth, knows and loves you best? How humbling is God's regard for human utterance, how moving his delight in it! God formed us to respond to him with words. We are made for dialogue. It makes sense that this conversation should not be interrupted by something as banal as the end of physical existence. When the heavenly choirs acclaim God with words of adoration, they do that for which our race was intended, offering a sacrifice of rational praise.

The part sung by the martyrs in this chorus is particularly stressed. John speaks of those 'who have come out of the great tribulation, who have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb.' The martyr is an archetype in the Christian narrative. Indeed, ours is a narrative of martyrdom. In Greek, μάρτυς means 'a witness', quite simply. It's a generic noun. It doesn't of itself point to testimony by bloodshed. In Christian usage, though, this semantic layer established itself right from the outset, making 'martyrdom' become a technical term. When, in his prologue to the Apocalypse, John calls Christ 'the faithful witness - μάρτυς πιστός' it's with reference, precisely, to his blood shed for our cleansing. The Good Shepherd's witness was sealed when he laid down his life, vindicated when he picked it up again.

Nowadays, martyrdom is close to us. We can't any longer keep it at bay, confined to antique accounts in stained glass windows. We hear of it daily in the news. There it can assume, it must be said, alarming contours. 'Martyrdom' has become, in certain settings, an ambiguous accomplishment. We hear people lay claim to it whom we'd be more inclined to see as perpetrators than as victims. Who's to say who is, who isn't, a martyr? The problem isn't new. St Cyprian, who lived among rival claims to martyrdom in third-century Carthage, passed on a maxim that still holds: *Martyrem non facit poena sed causa*. It isn't death as such that makes a martyr but the cause for which death is endured. No 'witness' is self-referential. A faithful witness displays the integrity of that to which witness is borne. In the ordinary sense, to 'bear witness' is to frame a statement about truth. To speak truthfully, to say things as they are, is something to which all of us are bound by grace *and* nature. Adam's task of naming was not restricted to a Linnéian classification of species. The words we employ to engage with the real, to describe it, aren't erratic constructs. God, making us in his image, made us capable of speech so that our different words might echo his *one* Word in antiphonal response. The Greek Fathers loved to say that man is λογικός, that is, capable of λόγος. To be human is essentially to be *of* the Word. That is how the Word could be incarnate. Now, it does not take more than a bout of common 'flu to remind us that we're dust, and subject to decay. Yet our spirit is fit to conceive of and enunciate words with a bearing on eternity. Hence the consequence of speech; hence the need to recall that what we say, and don't say, matters - at times more than all else.

Today we honour 37 martyrs we are proud to claim as ours. Their lives took different courses. Their characters were various. Yet all had this in common: their speech was 'Yes' and 'No'; no threat of violence could make them substitute one for the other. They resolved to die because they held truth dearer than life itself. They were canonised for this love of truth. To know the truth is one thing. To love it is another. Love is conquered over time. Only slowly does it flower into fortitude. For St John Fisher, our patron, the asceticism of love was practised in public life. In preaching, study, statesmanship, he maintained the integrity of words. Finding it imperilled, he knew he had to speak. Another Cambridge martyr whose light, I've always thought, shines benignly over Fisher House is St John Houghton. As a Carthusian monk, he was professionally a man of silence. His listening life prepared him to *keep* silence when others tried to make him say what he knew to be false. He was what the Psalmist calls a whole-hearted man. He'd sooner have his heart pulled from his body than yield to half-heartedness. We celebrate these martyrs not just because we are blessed to walk for a while where they once walked. We would follow in their footsteps always. We are called, as much as they were, to bear witness to the truth in a world seduced by falsehood. Who knows what account you and I will be called upon to give in our times, our so strange times? May our martyrs help us to revere the truth, to speak no untruth. May our lives and lips proclaim, both here and hereafter, words of eternal significance and beauty, not merely temporising words. May we be fully consecrated in the truth, graced to suffer and, yes, even to die for love of it. Amen.