

PIETÁ

Address at Compline on Tuesday of Holy Week

Reading: Luke 23. 44-56

SAINT Luke tells us that the women who followed Jesus from Galilee stood at a distance watching his final hours on the cross. Later in the day they traced his last journey to the sepulchre, to return after the sabbath with the necessaries to embalm him. And in *his* gospel, Saint John pictures the mother of Jesus, with John, at the foot of the cross, while Jesus dies. From this blend of memories emerges the traditional picture of Mary receiving the body of Jesus as it was taken down from the cross, and before it was taken for burial. *Pietá*, the scene is called, which is the Italian for pity or compassion; a scene beloved of the artists of the Renaissance; the most famous of which is the sculpture by Michael Angelo in the Basilica of St Peter.

But Worcester has its *Pietá* as well; less famous, as yet, but then more recent, being made by the sculptor Glynn Williams in 1991, to stand in the crypt and commemorate the artists and craftspeople who worked on the restoration of the Cathedral at that time. It is (to my mind) a remarkable work of art. For here is the dead Christ; that much is plain. The dead Christ; but held in whose arms? *Mary*, according to the tradition of the *Pietá*; but *this* is a nameless figure, a faceless figure; a human figure, certainly, for it has hands; but a figure without identity. Perhaps we are supposed to supply the missing information ourselves, and so what name or face might *we* give to the one who carries Jesus at the end of his last agony? We might put in the names of Joseph of Arimathea, or Nicodemus, who in the gospel story carried him to the tomb. We might mention the Roman soldiers who undid him from the cross. Or we might think more widely; we might recall the parable of the sheep and the goats, and remember that all who do a service to the least of the brothers and sisters of Jesus do that service to him. So we might supply the names and faces of *all* who carry heavy loads on behalf of others, visiting the sick, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, caring for those in prison. Any one of these, we might say, bears the body of Jesus in their arms. And we are free to think these thoughts, let our minds wander in this way, because the artist has left it to *us* to supply the face.

And as I look at this *Pietá*, another thought comes to mind. For the figure seems to me not only womanlike, or humanlike, but treelike as well. That torso is a mighty trunk; and if that is so, the limbs are branches as well as arms. In which case, is the figure not only the mother of the Lord who received him from the cross, but the cross itself? For there were many legends of the holy cross spun in the middle ages; fanciful, some of them, but still (to my mind) significant.

One told how the wood of the cross mercifully unbent itself to support the weight of Jesus in his agony. The tale is told in the great Passiontide hymn of Bishop Venantius Fortunatus:

Bend thy boughs, O Tree of Glory!
 Thy relaxing sinews, bend;
 For awhile the ancient rigour
 That thy birth bestowed, suspend,
 And the King of heavenly beauty
 On thy bosom gently tend!

Such a poetic flight may not appeal to contemporary minds, for whom nothing must temper the bitter agony and harsh reality of the crucifixion. And yet, as soon as I spot the word 'tree' in scripture or liturgy, I wonder if there is an idea waiting to be re-discovered. There is a rich spirituality of trees in scripture, not always noticed, from the Garden of Eden to the Heavenly City in the Book of Revelation, and the imaginative appeal of it should do something to cross the current cultural void between, on the one hand, Christianity and, on the other hand, Green and even Neo-pagan spirituality. So maybe that old medieval fancy of the Cross as the Tree of Life, giving some respite to the Son of Man in his pain, giving some refreshment and healing to humankind in its ecological crisis, has something to say to the contemporary world.



A final thought about Glynn Williams' *Pietà*. The left arm, or limb, of the Mother, or of the Tree, is detached. Just one of those 'modern' artistic stunts? Not to my mind. For while it is the right limb that supports the body of Jesus, it is the body of Jesus which supports the left limb. Jesus is the holder as well as the held. For though we see him here a dead body, without strength or life, he is at all times the Living One, upholding all things (as the Scriptures say) by the word of his power. And whatever service we do him, whatever burden we bear for him, whatever love we show for him, we do only because of the service, the support, and the love he first gave to us.

PETER ATKINSON
 Dean of Worcester

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