

Homily for the Requiem Mass for Sr Anne Hammersley cp

The love of Christ, our crucified Saviour, conquers death.

The last time I spoke with Sr Anne, when she was at St Gemma's, I thanked her for her collaboration in the Chaplaincy at Leeds Trinity. She recalled with particular pleasure our pilgrimages to Rome. As I drove home I remembered what in retrospect, though not at the time, was an amusing incident during one of those pilgrimages. Whilst waiting at Termini station for our train to the airport, I mistook the arrivals board for the departures board, with the result that we all had to run like mad with our heavy luggage for a good half mile to catch a train that was on the verge of departing. Sister Anne told me subsequently that one of the students nearly collapsed *en route* protesting, "I can't go any further" to which Anne, ever the practical person, replied, not unreasonably, "You have no choice."

As we spoke at St Gemma's, the hospice of which she was a Trustee, I said, "Is this it?" and she replied looking at me steadily, and in a kindly way, "Yes, this is it." She had no choice. She who had sought to live after having been diagnosed with cancer a number of years ago, was now dying, and rather more quickly than I think most of us had anticipated. She told me that she had had enough and that she would prefer to die sooner rather than later. I said that I would pray then that she should die within a short time frame and we smiled conspiratorially at each other. It's a bit unusual praying that somebody should die and such a prayer is only understandable within the context of faith.

I thought that I would go a bit further. I knew that Anne had been very touched by the manner in which her good friend and fellow Passionist Fr John Kearns had died a few years before. She told me that he had very consciously embraced the cross of having cancer and had integrated that into his vocation as a Passionist. I suggested that she was now in a position to do something similar. She looked at me with one of her looks and said "Well." Her look said: "Don't be daft. I am the one who is dying here. You don't understand what you are talking about" She was wholly engaged in carrying the cross and preparing for death. At the same time, she knew that I was trying to help and her look communicated forgiveness to me for my being so daft and indeed, thank God, love, which I found extraordinary. In those moments she reached beyond her suffering to affirm me in my vocation and to iterate at the last the reality of our friendship. She was indeed a true Passionist.

And that memory, the memory that Sister Anne showed me very simply that she loved me when she had a lot of other things on her mind, helps me to understand a little more deeply the message of salvation proclaimed in our readings today. Love changes everything. Love is stronger than death. Love destroys death.

If our lives comprised simply a certain period of time from which we were plucked involuntarily and then thrust into the abyss, all happiness would be snatched, all relationships would be unbearably fragile, all plans would be vitiated by an overwhelming sense of purposelessness. It was precisely this darkness that Jesus entered into at Calvary in

the most perfect act of love that could ever be. Yet still now this darkness encompasses so many of the people of this generation who cannot discover a reason for hope and who live quiet lives of sadness, unprotestingly. Only love can rescue them. The genius of the venerable Elizabeth Prout, whose birthday we mark today, was not simply that she gave girls educational opportunities that had hitherto been denied them; it was that she did this with love.

In the short span of years that are granted to us, the experience that we are loved by another changes absolutely everything. We become aware that in fact we do have a choice. We can love that person back. And then we intuit that it doesn't matter that time is passing because we have discovered the profound purposefulness underpinning our existence as men and women, namely that we are called to love, that we are created for love.

And then as Christians we discover – and we discover this anew pretty much every day – something even more extraordinary, something which is communicated to us by the gospel chosen by Sister Anne for today, namely that Jesus has chosen us in love. His choice of us saves us from our approaching deaths, about which we have no choice, so extraordinary is his power. He has destroyed the ancient curse of death and he has communicated to us his eternal life. And his choice of us is permanent. It is sealed in his blood. It perdures beyond death. The Covenant he has established with us is irrevocable.

And there is something else that the gospel helps us to understand, something that has only just occurred to me in the writing of this homily. Our collaboration with the Holy Spirit through the living out of our several vocations within the Church not only produces fruit, but, as Jesus says “fruit that will last.” These words indicate that mysterious value of every work that we engage in in the name of Jesus our Crucified Lord. This value cannot be plumbed by the human intellect. Clearly, our service is not impactful merely in the moment in which our earthly lives unfold. It has an ongoing, indeed, Jesus' words suggest, cumulative influence for good whose nature is known only to God. Anne's ministry, for example, her attentiveness to others in spiritual direction, her vision on the Provincial Council, the non-judgemental love she demonstrated towards the students, continues to bear fruit within the Church on earth after her death.

Her vocation, and that of each one of us, is caught up in the unstoppable surge of new life which bursts out of the empty tomb of Jesus and encompasses every person on earth. The beauty of this new life is captured in the great song of creation which we heard in our first reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus. Even as we participate in this new life, we are being transformed by it. Knowing this gives us confidence to petition God our Father to forgive Sister Anne her sins. We ask that he will bring to perfection in her that work of sanctification already begun of which very happily we have been the witnesses.

Mgr Paul Grogan