

PANEGYRIC given to the Guild of All Souls Annual Requiem, Saturday, 8 November 2014, Church of the Advent, Boston, by Father Swain, Superior-General of the Guild.

One of the ugliest churches in New York is a neighbour of mine, just 25 blocks down Park Avenue. And when I say ugly, I mean ugly, in that fierce, proud way that churches sometimes are. But this church has one lovely feature, its stone porch. It doesn't seem in harmony with the building it admits one to, and that is because it isn't. It comes from the previous St Bartholomew's Church, which stood on ground which has been hallowed over time since then for other reasons, for it has been the home of Brooks Brothers, a different kind of religion, since 1915. But in 1892, St Bartholomew's was at that location, 44th and Madison. It was a beautiful church designed by the same architect who designed my church, James Renwick. From that church, which did not yet have its lovely portico, the Rector, Dr Greer, rushed out one afternoon in 1892. He had not even the presence of mind to take a topcoat on that blustery day, or his high hat, for this was an emergency call. He immediately hailed a hansom cab and was taken at once to an address immediately known to every New Yorker in 1892: One West 57th Street, at Fifth Avenue. It was immediately known to everyone because it was the largest private home in the history of New York, then, ever before, or ever since. It took up the whole footprint of Bergdorf-Goodman, which is there to-day in its place.

In a small room upstairs in that palatial home a young man, a senior at Yale, lay dying of typhoid fever. His parents were ardent church goers, communicants of St Bartholomew's, and indeed had met there when both were teaching Sunday school. They were also arguably the richest couple in America. Their son and heir, called Billy, had been given every advantage imaginable, and despite his gilded youth, had grown up to be personable, charming, considerate and interested in many facets of life. He was beloved in his family and by his classmates. Once the physicians, the best money could buy, concluded there was little they could do, the frantic parents sent for Dr Greer. When the head of the Medical School at Columbia took out his pocket watch and took the boy's pulse, it was so weak, he simply shook his head. The young man was delirious and from time to time called out the names of his agonised family who sat there, unable to do anything. Their money, their place in society, and their power were all useless, for that was the day that God had appointed for their son and brother to die. When Dr Greer arrived, he prayed at the bedside, holding the boy's hand, and begging God to heal him. In his heart, he knew there was but little hope. And now, the richest man in America and his wife, asked him to leave the room with them and give them some consolation. In the Protestant Episcopal Church at

that time, outside of churches like yours and mine, it was thought wrong and wicked to pray for the dead, indeed it was a chargeable offence for the clergy to do so. Since Dr Greer was handicapped by his own narrow view of God and his mercy, and his ignorance of what the Church had in its birth-right to ask, he had to think of something to say. What he thought of was but a glimmer he had of the Truth. He said, "You believe your son to be in the next room?" "Yes," they said. "But you cannot see him. How can you know this?" His father replied, "We believe he is still there, we can feel it." "Even though you cannot see him, hear him or speak to him?", asked Dr Greer. "Yes, of course." Dr Greer said, "In our Father's house are many mansions, many rooms. Soon, perhaps to-day, your son will be called to a different room. You will not see him there, you will not be able to speak to him, nor he to you, but you will know, you will trust, you will believe that he is there. He is simply passing from this room to another. The bond between you can never be extinguished for it is made of the strongest material ever: Love." That's not bad, and we hope the parents were comforted, but beyond this, the Protestant Episcopal Church of 1892 could not go. Oh...who were those people? Cornelius Vanderbilt II and his wife Alice. Their son did die that day, and in his memory they built that very handsome stone porch in front of Renwick's church at 44th and Madison. It was so treasured that even when the present monstrosity was built next to the Waldorf, the entire porch was moved there.

Had Dr Greer known what the Guild of All Souls knew, and knows, he could have offered something of even greater value.

¶God is not finished with us even after death, he has not given up on us

¶There IS something we can do, which we have been told in Holy Scripture and in the Church's Tradition does help. The modern church disdains this, it tells us that we are there to celebrate the life of the deceased, to dwell on his or her accomplishments, look at photographs, chuckle indulgently at past foibles and stories. Rubbish!

¶The 19th century problem was Protestant prejudice, ignorance of the full doctrine of the Catholic Church part of the birth-right of the Church of England. Our problem to-day is quite different ----It is a complete lack of understanding and a complete refusal to put forward Catholic teaching in this matter. There should be no fuzziness with this question, no lack of information, no uncertainty about what we believe. Our Lord said it, the Church has taught it from the beginning, from the catacombs where frightened Christians scratched messages asking passers-by to pray for a friend who had died witnessing to Christ before facing the lions.

We see here nothing but the Church's complete failure of nerve in teaching the truth. It is idiotic to acquiesce to the idea that all religions have equal value in talking about the afterlife or about God Himself. It is time we proclaimed the Truth about Death and Resurrection. We have the Truth from Scripture and Tradition. We know the Truth, as God Himself has shared it with us. And showing respect for other religions and living in harmony with other people, admirable though these goals may be, do NOT mandate discarding our own robust Catholic theology of death and Resurrection. It is the Truth that matters. Of course people have a right to their beliefs in society, but in the Church, Error has no privileges.

One of the first things that normally happens after a person dies and his relations meet with the parish priest, is that we start hearing discussion of "what he would have wanted" (which always means "what WE want"), her favourite song, his favourite poem, her favourite flowers, and then of course, who is to speak ABOUT the deceased. I can tell you that the faces of people are a study when I must tell them in all charity that the preferences in life of the deceased are now irrelevant – he no longer admires songs, she no longer adores flowers. It now matters what will give help, comfort and solace to the Holy Soul now dead, not to those who will attend the Mass. And in the traditional rites, who will speak about the dead person, oh excuse me, the "person who has just passed away"? No one. A sermon will be given on what matters – the death and resurrection of Our Lord, his dying for our sins, the hope of new life forever in Christ, and the prayer that we must make for the happy repose of the soul of a dead man or woman, who was a mortal and a sinner, just as you and I are.

Dear auditors, What if I stepped off the kerb in Louisburg Square at the wrong time, and was hit by a speeding motorist? Well, I suppose I would have the consolation of being killed in Louisburg Square, but I would be just as dead! Would I be ready to meet my creator? I would not. And neither, I suspect, would many of you. It means being in a state of complete grace and utter harmony with God. I can claim NO SUCH THING this morning. Can you? If not, we must make right what we can in our lives, we make our confessions regularly, but we still know the Truth. We shall probably not be ready to see the full vision of God at the time of our death: as Dante describes it, we shall not be ready to meet Our Lady in the Eighth Sphere, the Holy Angels in the Ninth Sphere, much less enter the Empyrean and see the full beatific vision of God. He will have more work to do with us after our deaths, and thank God! Nothing is more encouraging, more hopeful, more congenial, more salvific, more wonderful in every way than the promise, the knowledge and the belief entrusted to us by Scripture and Tradition that God's mercy and his grace and correction GO BEYOND THE GRAVE. Dr Greer did not know this, and was not permitted to believe it by the Protestant

Episcopal Church, but we, in large part due to the work of The Guild of All Souls, know better. Of course, Bishop Grafton or Father Van Allen, your Rector's predecessors, who were both Council members of the Guild in their day, could have told him better, but bigotry would have stopped his ears just as surely as cotton wool.

November is the month of the Holy Souls, and we rejoice to pray for our dear dead as often and as fervently as we can. It is the least we can do, so little really. But it is also the most, because it is a perfect, selfless act. Did you know that the only Mass at which we may not pray for anyone living or for any concern is a Requiem Mass? It is because it is completely and utterly selfless. We may not bring our laundry list of worries and petitions, we may think only about others and their needs. How refreshing to us in our society – for once it is not about us, it is about others in spiritual need. The Church's perfect prayer, the Mass, is the best way to do this, and the Requiem Mass has been a consolation to the bereaved, a medicine for the mourning, and the solace and consolation of the dead themselves, for hundreds and hundreds of years, applying the merits of the pleading Sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross to wash them from the temporal punishment for their sins. There is no point in our pretending that sin does not exist; if we are honest with ourselves, we not only know that it does, but we know how likely we are to participate in it and how we have done so in the past. Sin is a reality. It is also a reality that sin separates us from God, because all sins involve our putting something in God's place. There is no relationship, whether our relationship to God, or parents and children, the dearest of friends, those romantically attached, or married couples, that can withstand the constant ignoring of that other person in favour of something else – whether it be money, power, business, alcohol, drugs, infidelity with others, or any other of a host of things. If we blot out that other person in any relationship and replace him or her with something else, we cannot be surprised to wake up and discover that the relationship is dying. It is no different with us and God, nor was it between God and the Holy Souls. The difference is they can no longer pray for themselves, it is we who have that job now, just as one day we pray that they may be in Heaven forever with the Blessed Trinity, Our Lady and all the Saints, and eager to pray for us. It is thus that we realise that the Church is in fact just like God Himself – three in one and one in three, the Church Triumphant in Heaven, the Church Expectant in Purgatory, and the Church Militant here on earth. In the Requiem Mass, as in all prayer for the dead - the only really selfless prayer - the Church comes together in all its parts and makes the whole Body of Christ. It is just that which we do today.

We are often asked to enclose an alms for the dead, either by the Guild or by your parish church, but not so that you can buy their souls' freedom. We are not selling indulgences to enrich the Guild, to enrich my insignificant

backstreet church or to enrich your magnificent church – frequented as it is by the great and the good, though in one's darkest moments one has been tempted by Friar Tetzel's example! No – it is because all Love, if it is real, must cost the lover something. There must be risk in love or it is safe, and safe love is love with strings, protecting us from hurt. Such love is not authentic. True love is brave and reckless, just like Our Lord's love for us on the Cross. Such love will risk anything. It fears nothing.

As those of you who know me well appreciate, at any given moment I am as likely to be thinking of the 19th century as the 21st, and some would say as likely to be living in it as this one, and so now without apology I return to the 19th century to close. But this time not to my native New York, but to rural Gloucestershire. The local squire, a baronet, was also a very highly talented fresco painter, and unlike many others of his class had gone to Italy not to drink and meet young ladies of dubious virtue, but to learn to do fresco painting from the experts at Assisi. After a time there, he perfected his own, new method of fresco painting, and people still use it to-day. He married a young lady, Isabella, whom he absolutely adored, and even in that more sentimental era, theirs was a marriage made in heaven, they adored each other, and were completely sympathique. They had one daughter and five sons, a happy model Victorian family, and very closely knit. Their happiness seemed complete and total, until one day, it wasn't. Over a very short period of time four of his five sons, and his daughter died of diphtheria. As his beloved Isabella nursed their daughter, hoping for the best but fearing the worst, and even having been warned of contagion, her daughter begged her for a consoling kiss. Isabella bent over and kissed her child – and it was quite literally the kiss of death, for within a fortnight she had contracted the disease also, and mother and daughter both were dead.

The young squire only in his early 30s, was left with but one son, the rest of his family dead and buried in the churchyard of the very small village church he could see from his library window. One day it occurred to him what he could do – he could build a new church in their memory, which would house their remains, and he could decorate the entire church himself with frescos. He engaged an eminent architect to build it in dominant English decorated Gothic style, but it was to be the squire himself who would paint the inside with glowing, living frescoes. Over a period of years he did so, and when the church was finally complete, the Lord Bishop of Gloucester consecrated it forever to the glory of God. The squire had dedicated the Church to the Holy Innocents, and asked the Bishop if prayers could be said for his dead wife and children. The Bishop of course refused, the Church of England does not pray for the dead, he said. So the ceremony went on with no mention of the dead who for the squire were central to the purpose of the church. There was of course a jollification, a party, at the manor house after the service and the

entire village was invited, all classes. The party went to a late hour when suddenly it began to be noticed that the squire himself had not been there for some time.

A small group of his closest friends noticed that the church stained glass glowed from within. They found him inside, kneeling next to the sarcophagi of his wife and children. What are you doing in the cold church, they asked, the service is long over? "It is only here that I can meet them, no, not their bodies, for they are long decayed, but I can pray for them and we are all of us tied together in that prayer, the living, our precious dead, and the Saints." At the last word, he waved his hand slightly to indicate his glowing frescoes of the Saints. "I built the church for myself as a consolation and as a tribute to them. I weep not, for I know I may pray for the repose of their souls. And that I will do here until I, too, am no more."

The squire was Sir Thomas Gambier Parry, Baronet, and his surviving son was later known as Sir C. Hubert H. Parry, Baronet, a very famous composer indeed, of the oratorios Judith and King Saul, many sets of canticles for Matins and Evensong and psalm settings, the lovely Blest Pair of Sirens, but is best known of course for his hymn Jerusalem, set to the words of William Blake, which we shall be singing tomorrow morning in my church for Remembrance Sunday, and the incomparable anthem I Was Glad, which he wrote at the invitation of HM King Edward VII for his coronation in 1902. It has been used at every one since, in 1911, in 1937 and in 1953.

But that night, after the lush service, the squire and his little son, not yet a great composer, went to the church he had built, and prayed for their dead. It was no surprise that he should have known to do so. For both Sir Thomas Gambier Parry and his son Hubert were members of The Guild of All Souls, you see, and that was why they knew better than poor old Dr Greer.

"I was glad, glad when they said unto me, We will go into the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand in thy gates, O Jerusalem."

(Ed. Note: My apologies to the Rector, clergy and people of St Bartholomew's. I mean no disrespect to them as a Christian community, and also quite realise that their church's architecture is a matter of personal taste! I am simply expressing my architectural view, and I am sure that there are those who would regard our church as less than exemplary architecturally! It is also true that one can recognise a building as being

rather ugly, but have great affection for it. Westminster Cathedral, for example, is clearly hideous architecturally; I like it a lot.

I might also add that in the early 1980s I went to many meetings devoted to keeping it looking exactly as it does, because although it may not be to my taste, it is indubitably part of the architectural face of New York and must remain intact!)