

SERMON, Annual Requiem of the Guild of All Souls, 9 November 2019, Church of the Advent, Boston

In 1959, a year of several distinguished occurrences, there was one which was at the same time gently touching, almost incredible, gracious and merciful, and to some minds, macabre. It happened to one of my predecessors as curate of the Church of St Mary the Virgin in Times Square, then under the legendary Father Grieg Taber. It happened to one of Father Taber's curates, who was called Everett Bertram Bosshard. He had had a perfectly ordinary and devout priesthood so far – a student at Nashotah House, completely convinced of the Catholic position in the Anglican Church and entirely formed by it. He exercised his ministry entirely within the Catholic Movement, and having had a bit of a difficult tangle with the Dean as a faculty member at Nashotah House (a time honoured tradition in all academic communities, as many of us know), he had resigned and been cast adrift. Just at that moment, Father Taber had a position open up for a curate at St Mary's, and interviewed Father Bosshard. It was mutually determined that this would be a good thing, and Father Bosshard duly moved into that rather gloomy and very large house on West 47th Street, which I know so well. He began to become known amongst the congregation, to the other clergy, to the Sisters of the Holy Nativity who then ministered there in the Mission House, and to the people on the streets and businesses of the surrounding parish, one of the most unusual parishes in the world.

At the Easter Fiesta of the Guild in 1959 at St Paul's, Carroll Street, in Brooklyn, Father Irish, the Rector, celebrated the Mass, and the Dean of Milwaukee Cathedral, newly elected Superior-General, preached the sermon. Father Bosshard, who had a special devotion to the Holy Souls, was asked to give a paper after luncheon, which he did. The Council were impressed by it, and asked him to take the office of Warden, the Guild's # 2 office, which had been occupied by Dean Maynard, the new Superior-General. Father Bosshard agreed with alacrity and was so elected.

One day, a few months later, Father Bosshard had been asked by Father Taber to take the Blessed Sacrament to two members of the congregation who were patients at St Luke's Hospital in Morningside Heights, just across the street from our Cathedral Church of St John the Divine. St Luke's Hospital was then, and until six years ago, an Episcopal Church hospital, and it therefore had an abnormally high percentage of communicants who had chosen to have operations and procedures done there. It was also, of course, the closest hospital to the Cathedral, Columbia University, and the Morningside Heights neighbourhood, another unique area. Making this journey then, as now, is most easily and cheaply done on the No. 1 Broadway Local train of the IRT line. I did so myself many times for just this purpose. On this occasion in 1959, Father Bosshard arrived at Times Square Station with the pyx around his neck in a leather pouch, then and now how it's done, and a small travelling white stole around his neck under his suit jacket. This procedure places the gold pyx just above one's heart. It is the universal custom that no priest ever speaks to anyone whilst carrying the Blessed Sacrament in this way, and I suppose he must already have had his subway tokens in his pocket, otherwise I'm not sure how he would have obtained them! No train was immediately visible and he sat down on a bench on the platform, a very normal action I have taken thousands of times, and many of you will have done the same on the T, perhaps even this morning. But this day was different.

It was his intention to board the train and take it to 110th Street. As Father Bosshard sat there, he must have begun to feel a pain in his chest, the searing one that often begins in the left arm, and is often accompanied by stomach upset and a feeling of dread, we are told by those who survive it. What nobody else knew was that Father had already been diagnosed with angina, and he must have known exactly what this pain was. He must then have been faced with a very difficult decision. Appeal for help? Take nitro glycerin, which he had in the pocket of his topcoat? He did neither. What he did was manage to open the pyx in the leather pouch hanging from his neck, remove the Sacred Host within, and consume it himself. He would have done this for two reasons. The first is the more prosaic, and that is that every priest is the custodian of the Sacraments and it was his sacred responsibility to safeguard it from profanation. Consuming it would do so. But there must have dawned a different realization in his mind. He must have understood, at once, that he was in fact likely to die and he was in possession of the one thing that any Christian longs for under these circumstances: the Blessed Sacrament. When I first came to St Mary's as a seminarian in 1983, there were still a number of people who had known him, and this story was told me several times. I have very often thought of it since. I must admit I have enormous admiration for the recollection of a man who *happened to be* a priest but remained a human being, knowing that he was certainly having a heart attack, who had the presence of mind both to defend the Blessed Sacrament but also the devotion to administer Viaticum, the last reception of the Blessed Sacrament for the journey to the next stage of life, to himself. It shows an extraordinary comfort with the whole reality of the judgment of the quick and the dead and the life of the world to come. He had known all about this matter and taught about it, as any priest has, but as we all know it is one thing to know about something and to talk about it, but another thing entirely when you experience it. This is often said of three events: Marriage, Ordination and Death!

In addition to being at peace with what was happening to him, in addition to trusting in God, as Warden of the Guild and the celebrant of hundreds of Requiem Masses I am absolutely certain that consciously or not he was fortified by the knowledge, not the hope, the knowledge, that this would be done for him too. And sixty years later, we have continued to offer Masses for him and remembered him on the anniversary of that fateful day in the Times Square IRT station. We have kept faith with him, as we shall keep faith with YOU if you are today members of the Guild. We have promised this to God, and as we know he always keeps his promises to us, so we know he desires we keep ours to him and to the Dead. That is what the Guild is for: keeping promises in love and prayer.

We think, naturally, in the Guild about our prayers for the dead, and so we ought, as this is our great spiritual work of mercy and our promise. We try to keep our attention focused on our promises and say the prayers we have undertaken to offer. A lovely lady at S. Clement's Philadelphia, my second curacy, and first rectorate, said of Requiem Masses and prayers for the dead, "Sometimes, Father, I think it's the only prayer I ever make that isn't selfish!" What we do not always think of, however, is that of all the souls we have prayed for who are journeying to God, there must be thousands now (if we consider the whole Guild since 1873 in Britain and in this country) who have reached their goal: him who is both the Good Shepherd of the sheep and the Lamb of God, true God and true Man, the Priest of Love who made himself the victim of his own sacrifice.

T. S. Eliot says

the communication

Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

I imagine that must be true. Think of all the time we waste talking nonsense and rubbish, the inconsequential doings of “famous” people, trivial entertainment, gossip, nasty and vicious communication, and things so utterly insignificant or inane that they are not worth the time and energy to say them. The dead have their attention brought to focus, like a laser, on what matters, their own pilgrimage through purification to perfection, and when it has been attained, the worship of the Holy Trinity forever in Heaven and their intercession for those of us still in our pilgrimage on earth, or those in purgatory. Death is revealed to us by Our Lord, not as a full stop, but as the way into another dimension of life. Eliot again:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

From 1950 to the 1990s, the Guild of All Souls and the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, joined together to offer a Joint Requiem, it was a nice co-operation and it allowed each to have its own separate service, the Guild had its Easter Fiesta and the CBS had its Saturday in the Octave of Corpus Christi service. While it continued, it reminded us very powerfully that we met as a Guild twice, once in November shrouded in black, unbleached candles, the *Dies Irae* and the catafalque, and once in Eastertide with the Paschal candle, white vestments, the Easter chants ringing out, and the usual beloved hymns. Occasionally people would question what for them was an odd dichotomy. I never found it so, and I was encouraged when I read in his letter announcing this new Joint Requiem in the 1950 Intercession Paper, that my predecessor both as Superior-General of the Guild and as Rector of S. Clements, Philadelphia, the great and saintly Father Franklin Joiner, expressed the very same sentiment.

Now and not for the first time, it occurs to me that Requiems and Eastertide are two sides of the same coin. We are all engaged on the same journey and if we remain committed to it as best we can, it follows Our Lord's: Bethlehem to Mount Calvary, to the hill of the Ascension and to Heaven itself. Our pilgrimage is meant to be the same: birth to death to life after death and then, we pray, to Heaven itself, our true native land. Because He made the journey, we can. Because he made the journey, we must try. Because he made the journey, we hope. Because he made the journey, we love. In his day, there was an overlay of appearance that time and space mattered, though this was not true with God, and never is. We now know that the cosmic and existential journey he made from his Conception in the womb of Our Lady to his Ascension, was subject neither to time or space, and therefore it exists and is available for us all to take our parts in, and take them we must. And that beginning must be made new, again, every day, which means that we all, together, begin it again... NOW.