

# Poulenc's Dialogue of Carmelites and Knowing the Time of the Visitation

Jeremiah 7.9-15; 1 Corinthians 12.1-11; Luke 19.41-47

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday 13 August (The Tenth Sunday after Trinity) by Father George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House*

**A**ND when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, *If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!* ST. LUKE 19.41-42

**T**HIS past week, I had the privilege of attending a performance of Francis Poulenc's 1956 opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* at the Royal Albert Hall. It presents in a powerful and sometimes shocking manner the story of the 16 Martyrs of Compiègne. These 16 Carmelite nuns were from the community or 'Carmel' of Compiègne, north of Paris. Their obedience to the ways of their order and their devotion to the Catholic faith were the crimes for which they were arrested. To believe in the Lord Jesus and to trust in him made them fanatics. They were taken to Paris and guillotined at what is now the Place de la Nation on 17 July 1794. This was just 10 days before the execution of Robespierre and the end of the Reign of Terror which claimed 1300 victims in the 6 weeks before the murder of the 16 nuns.

Carried through Paris in an open cart, jeered by crowds of onlookers, the nuns sang hymns of praise, including the Salve Regina and parts of Compline and Vespers. In Poulenc's opera, while standing together and waiting to be executed, the sisters sing the Salve Regina until each voice is cut off by the blade of the guillotine. The last nun to be executed sings the Veni Creator Spiritus, a hymn we sang here on Pentecost, as we prayed that God the Holy Spirit would come and confirm and strengthen those preparing for laying on of hands and anointing. On that day in July 1794 each of the sisters knelt and sang the Veni Creator Spiritus before her execution. They also sang the Laudate Dominum: O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people, until they were silenced by the blade.

What makes it possible to bear such a witness to goodness and truth and beauty in the face of barbarity, lies and ugliness? Poulenc shows us the way in which the sisters were very mixed. They displayed all-too human weaknesses, fears, pettiness as well as the more powerful gifts of the Spirit, gifts of faithfulness and courage. What makes it possible to recognize when we are called to witness boldly to the Gospel of our Redemption, and in the moment of trial to be faithful with all our weaknesses and confusions?

Last week, we celebrated the Transfiguration of Our Blessed Lord, when His face and body shone with white light, brighter than snow. In His Transfiguration, chosen disciples glimpsed something of the Glory of God the Son shining in human flesh. They also glimpsed their destiny and our destiny. Our destiny is to be so transformed by the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit that we shine with this same glorious light.

This hope points us also to the celebration of the Falling Asleep and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary which we will celebrate here on Tuesday evening. On the one hand, the vocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is singular, no one else said “Be it unto me” in quite the same way. On the other hand, hers is the vocation of each Christian. Like the Martyrs of Compiègne, each of us is called on different occasions to respond in trust, in hope to the voice of God the Holy Spirit and the promises of God – be it unto me according to Thy word.

Each of us, in a different way, bears the Word of Life - God the Son has come to dwell in us, to live in us, not in a symbolic way, but He is more near than we are to ourselves. The Falling Asleep and Assumption picture to us the destiny of the human person and the whole body of Christ raised up in Christ.

In our readings today it is made clear to us that these gifts come to us only with struggle. The incredible gifts which are given to us in Christ and with the Holy Spirit come through trial and temptation. We recognize this to be true.

*AND when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!*

Let us be clear, Christ is not weeping for himself. He is weeping because He sees the disaster which the people who reject Him and His message are bringing upon themselves.

*thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground,*

In historical terms, Our Blessed Lord foretells the destruction of the city forty years later by the Roman army. The city will be completely destroyed. Jerusalem was not destroyed because the military was weak or because of bad politicians. She was destroyed because she turned her back on goodness, beauty and truth. The betrayal and exaction of Christ revealed a profound rejection of life and all that belongs to human flourishing.

Dr Pusey's mentor and spiritual guide, John Keble, saw in this picture of divine visitation a picture of our Christian life here and now. These are Keble's words:

'Even when our Lord and Master is actually among us, come to visit us in some of His many ways, for correction or for mercy, we [may not] know His time, we [may not be] aware of His Presence . . . In one sense, the whole period of the Gospel, the whole time of his presence in the Christian Church, is a time of His visitation'.

Our prayers and liturgy help us to connect the ever-present day of visitation and the day our Lord arrived for the last time at Jerusalem and wept. At every celebration of the Holy Mysteries, we use the same words with which the people of Jerusalem greeted the Lord: *Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.*

When we say these words, when we pray with the choir singing these words, we emphasize that the Lord's coming is not just something in the past. The Lord comes to the new Jerusalem, to his Church, to the city set high on hill. The Lord comes to each of us, in the intimacy of the inner life, he comes to the Temple of the soul made in his image in likeness. He comes to be our food and drink.

Even coming forward in hope to meet the Lord who comes to us is a kind of trial. Dr Pusey reminds us that the apparent weakness and littleness of this great act, coming to receive small quantities of bread and wine, is a kind of trial. How can these ordinary creatures be for us the body and blood of the Lord who came to Jerusalem on a colt? And yet, in this act of faith and obedience, we indeed recognize those things which belong to our peace, the presence of the Lord Jesus, and the gifts of the Spirit. In this simple act of faith something of the trial of living the Christian life is made real and actual.

Our Lord invites us to see the significance of little acts of faith and obedience. Jerusalem was a city much fought over. So each of us comes into the holy city of Christ's Church through some kind of struggle, even if it the struggle is the faith of our parents in the face of claims which would deny the reality of the promises of Christ.

We know ourselves to have been defended by God's grace against many temptations. Perhaps we can see and recognize when we have felt besieged by the world, by our own weaknesses or temptations. Perhaps we have been on one or more occasions conquered by the enemy, when we have chosen for ourselves what we recognize to be serious sin, when we

have turned away from goodness, truth, and beauty of God. Our Lord has come to us again, the walls of the city of been rebuilt in us, He has made His home in us.

I have focussed on visitation as a personal encounter with the Lord who comes to the temple of the human soul. However, the readings make clear that this visitation takes place on a social level also. A city or a community can embody a way of life. With all their human weakness, the sisters of the Carmel of Compiègne were enabled to recognize the face of Christ and to choose him in the face of ugliness and lies. Our Lord does not address an individual, He weeps over a city which does not recognize the things which belong to her peace. Jeremiah the prophet fills this out, in a description of Jerusalem in his day:

*WILL ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not;*

Idolatry is not a problem we have left behind us. Whenever we allow principles, or desires to occupy the place in our lives where God belongs, we worship an idol, some perversion of truth, goodness, and beauty. The sins which Jeremiah describes – murder, or hatred, lies, adultery, confusion of our loves - these all express forms of idolatry.

Today, he speaks especially to us, to those who know themselves to be citizens of the holy city. He warns us of complacency, of coming to ‘stand before [God] in this house, ... called by my name’ and to rob from God,

not to give God and one another the love and faith which we owe to God and to one another.

We might think about the culture of unforgiveness and cancelling – where the world teaches us that certain kinds of people or certain kinds of sin are not worthy of forgiveness.

Last week, when we considered the Transfiguration, I invited us to consider questions of the beginning and end of life, or perhaps better stated: how do we recognize a human person who has claims on our love and care? The celebration of the Incarnation on 25 March, not 25 December, gives part of the answer: one that is very counter-cultural.

On the one hand, we live in a society which spends a lot of money to enable athletes with disabilities to compete, and on the other hand huge pressure is often put on vulnerable parents so that persons with serious disabilities are not born at all. How does this strange contradiction affect each of us? Do we live and act in such a way that we recognize the person created in the image of God and made for likeness of God?

What makes us to know what belongs to our peace? What are the building blocks which establish a city where the Prince of Peace and the author of life is welcome?

St Paul addresses us as he addressed the Church in Corinth: *Concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.* In other words, he asks us how we have responded to our Lord's visitation.

Rather, he tells us that we have been given the things which belong to our peace.

The spiritual gifts which St. Paul describes are the presence of Jesus in the soul. The spiritual gifts are also the presence of Christ in the Church. These gifts of the Spirit show themselves in particular forms of ministry or life: "*There are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all.*" The gifts of the Spirit will be developed differently in different souls at different times, yet they are one gift.

These gifts will be the focus of the epistle readings for the next few weeks.

The great promise that is put before us here is that we may choose imperfectly, very feebly even; like the sisters of Compiègne, we are very mixed people.

Yet every small choice for good, every little effort to prepare a place for Christ, is amplified by the power of God. Whatever we bring is given back multiplied and enlarged.

*WHEN I called upon the Lord, he regarded my petition; yea, from the battle that was against me : and he hath brought them down, even he that is of old, and endureth for ever; O cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall nourish thee.*

*UNTO thee, O Lord, lift I up my soul; O my God, in thee have I trusted, let me not be confounded : neither let mine enemies triumph over me; for all they that look for thee shall not be ashamed.*

If we are able to reach out toward this promise, we will each of us, and for one another, discover it is real and true.