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If You Knew (Matthew 5:43-48)

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Read Poem: <http://www.ellenbass.com/books/the-human-line/if-you-knew/>

St Benedict enjoined his monks to keep death daily before their eyes. The idea is that being conscious of our mortality orients us to what really matters in life.¹ Given that I'm going to die, given that my life is finite, how will I spend my time? In our poem tonight, contemporary American poet Ellen Bass focuses on a related question. Given that people around me are going to die, how will I be towards them? 'What if you knew you'd be the last to touch someone?' She invites us to see one another in the light of our vulnerability and fragility; she evokes a tenderness that has radical implications for our life together. 'If you were taking tickets, for example, at the theater ... giving back the ragged stubs, you might take care to touch that palm'. Yet this is a tenderness not so easy to practice in the mess and hurtfulness of our daily round.

We get glimpses of it sometimes, at funerals. I've heard people complain of such occasions that the 'dead' are only eu-logised – that is, spoken well of. The good things are remembered, while the ambiguities and difficulties in people's characters tend to be glossed over. There can be something really problematic, dishonouring about this, of course. But it also suggests something important. It's that very commonly, when someone dies, what we remember first is not their faults and flaws. And in the light of death, even where there's been hurt or anger between people, what divided us doesn't seem quite so important anymore. We can find ourselves letting things go, forgiving more readily, seeing as loveable foibles that which previously had driven us completely nuts. In the same way, says Bass, when we remember that someone is *going* to die, it doesn't matter quite so much that

¹ *The Rule of St Benedict*, trans. Anthony C. Meisel and M.L. del Mastro (New York: Image Books, 1975), Chapter 4.47, p.53.

they pull ‘their wheeled suitcase too slowly through the airport’, or forget to signal on the road, or ‘won’t say Thank you’ in the pharmacy.

What’s this about? For one thing, it seems, in the light of death we realise more clearly our solidarity with one another, the sharedness of our human condition. We see others as vulnerable, complicated, wounded like us, fellow mortals, children of the one Father who makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, who sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Keeping death before our eyes fosters the kind of contemplative vision that liberates us from viewing others as if what’s most important about them is how they impact me. It enables us to fore-bear with one another, to cut each other some slack; in Rowan Williams words, ‘to “love human beings in a human way” ... as fragile fellow-creatures held in the love of God’.

For another thing, in the light of death it’s as if we realise more deeply the striking mystery of someone’s having this singular thing, their own life to lead. How someone matters simply because they are and will not pass this way again; just as, in the words of poet Czeslaw Milosz, ‘every leaf of grass has its fate’, and ‘a sparrow on the roof, a field mouse, and an infant that would be named John or Teresa was born for long happiness or shame and suffering once only, till the end of the world’.²

Listen again to the third stanza of our poem: ‘A friend told me she’d been with her aunt. They’d just had lunch and the waiter, a young gay man with plum black eyes, joked as he served the coffee, kissed her aunt’s powdered cheek when they left’. How vivid the image of the ‘aunt’s powdered cheek’ – I can almost smell its perfume! It reminds me of my grandmother dressing up to go out – it evokes a world, a milieu, and this woman’s careful grooming for a special lunch out with her niece. In a phrase, Ellen Bass lets us glimpse a personality, a life-story. And tells how the waiter with his ‘plum black eyes’ really *saw* her before she died, gifted her with his banter and affection. The poem reminds us what we can do or fail to do for one another, moment by moment.

² From ‘And Yet’ in Czeslaw Milosz, *Provinces: Poems 1987-1991*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Haas (New York: Ecco Press, 1993), p.13.

So ‘how close *does* the dragon’s spume have to come? How wide does the crack in heaven have to split?’ before we see people that way, before we see them whole and ‘as they are’? Bass is saying that we don’t need for someone actually to die in order to let their mortality inform our responsiveness, our beholding them with tenderness in all their mystery and fragility ‘soaked in honey; stung and swollen, reckless, pinned against time’. And I’m struck here by the resonance with words of Thomas Merton who awoke one day to a sudden realisation of the ineffable beauty of those around him, exclaiming: ‘As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun’.³

And yet ... are they really? ... *all* shining like the sun, *all* soaked in honey? We can just about imagine people this way when we get over ourselves sufficiently to forgive the annoying habits of our basically benign neighbours and friends. Jesus, however, enjoins something harder, infinitely harder than this. He commands that we practise this same tender, contemplative seeing of our enemies also, those whose deliberate evil and culpable blindness have deeply wounded – even blighted our lives.

Many of you know that my brother Michael is a journalist. He’s just back from Iraq and this week he reported the story of a woman in Mosul, whose only surviving son succumbed to death this week – suffering burns to 60% of his body inflicted by an ISIS attack. She’s lost her two other sons in the last few years – also victims of ISIS. I’ve been thinking of her all week. ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven’ (5:44-45). How does Jesus dare ask this of us?

Jesus was speaking to people living under Roman occupation and in brutal times. He may have known mothers like this mother in Mosul. If this teaching is given

³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells, Burns & Oates, 1995), p.157.

in the hearing of people, some of whom had lost everything that mattered to them, that tells us something about how we are to receive it. And what it tells us, it seems to me, is that Jesus' command that we see each other as 'fragile fellow creatures', all equally children of God, is not some sentimental vision of togetherness or fellow-feeling – the kind of faux community that's generated at New Year's Eve or on national holidays. Nor is it a glib evasion of the horrifying depth of our capacity to wound and be wounded by one another. It is rather a call to love of an altogether different order, love that is in no way conditioned by what others do and are. It's a call to love with the love of God. And how is that possible?

We become capable of it, I think, not only by remembering that others are going to die, but being willing at some level to 'die' ourselves, to be utterly handed over so that the love of God may be wrought in and through us. This doesn't mean giving up on our cry for justice. The love of God is lucid about the need for responsibility, repentance. Nor does it mean giving up on ourselves and our own belovedness – that fact that we and our sufferings do matter. But it *is* a call to somehow embrace or befriend our life's wounding, not to resist the fact of it. And this is a crucifying process.

We suffer this necessary dying *whenever* we give up being so attached to our demands about how things must go, when we let go impatience, judgement and self-righteousness even in small things; when we attend generously enough to someone that we remember we might indeed be the last to touch them. But we deepen our capacity for this kind of unconditional love only by way of prayer, gradually being transformed by grace into the likeness and compassion of God. In her poem, 'This Morning I Pray for My Enemies', Joy Harjo writes: 'I turn in the direction of the sun and keep walking'. That's it really. Turn in the direction of the sun and keep walking – right through the 'crack in heaven' and sprayed by the dragon's spume, willing to be vulnerable to both the tenderness *and* the tragedy of our life together, and so becoming slowly whole, perfect 'as our heavenly Father is perfect'.