

RUIN AND RESURRECTION

A sermon preached by Ronald Knox on Palm Sunday, 1934

Amen I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. – John 12:24

Today, 1,900 years ago, it looked as if the fortunes of the great Galilean Prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, were at their height. It was the time of the feast; a great multitude of people from Galilee had come up to celebrate it, and these, plainly, were proud of their fellow countryman. At home, where his family was known to many of them, they might criticize him and laugh at his pretensions; but here in Judea it was a different thing; they were not going to have their own Prophet laughed at by the Jews of Judea. That is human nature. And then, just a day or two before Palm Sunday, an extraordinary rumor went round Jerusalem itself. A man of Bethany, a well-known figure there, had died and been buried; and when he had already been four days in the tomb, Jesus of Nazareth had called to him and he had come out alive. Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem; it was as if you heard that somebody had been raised from the dead, say, at Harborne. Naturally, crowds of people came out from Jerusalem to look at the man who had been buried and come to life again; to question his sisters, and have their own assurance about the facts. And these, convinced by what they saw and heard, were hardly less enthusiastic on behalf of the Prophet than the Galileans themselves.

The result was a kind of public demonstration. Word got round that he would be coming into Jerusalem on the first day of the week; they lined the roads, prepared to shout “Hosanna” in his path. And he seemed, curiously, to welcome this demonstration rather than otherwise; he came, though the distance was so short, riding on an ass; and so deliberately reminded them of an old prophecy which said that a King would come into Jerusalem so mounted. At that, their enthusiasm passed all bounds; they climbed up the trees, and cut down palm-branches to spread them in the way; others, not to be outdone, took off their coats and made a carpet of them. Hosanna, they cried, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel! You would have said, wouldn’t you, that now the career of the Galilean Prophet was at its very zenith. Who could tell what might happen? The Roman Emperor was far away, a recluse, hated by his subjects. The Roman governor in Judea itself had made himself profoundly unpopular. Was this not the opportunity for the multitudes to shake off the Roman yoke altogether, and proclaim a kingdom with the Son of David as its head? So at least the Pharisees feared; it was the only excuse they found for silencing their own guilty consciences, that this Jesus of Nazareth was a dangerous pretender, who would get them into political trouble; and then, they argued, the Romans would come and take away their place and nation. Which, they asked, was more valuable – the life of one man, or the existence of the Jewish people? Why, already the very Gentiles were beginning to be impressed by these tales of miracle; and a deputation of them had asked for an audience with the Prophet as if they, too, were ready to attach themselves to his cause! It was expedient that one man should die, rather than that the whole nation should perish.

And he? What does he make of it all? When this last evidence of his popularity is brought to his notice, does he go out and make a speech to them? Does he begin to appoint lieutenants, and form plans of

campaign for the deliverance of his people? No, his comment is a sad one, and a mysterious one. “Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” He is speaking - who can doubt it? – in the first instance about himself. He is the grain of wheat, that is to be buried in the ground when his mangled and crucified body is committed to the sepulcher. He is to be buried in a garden, in the first days of spring:

Here’s an acre sown indeed

With the richest, royallest Seed

That the earth did e’er suck in

Since the first man died for sin. (Francis Beaumont, “On Westminster Abbey”)

And his Resurrection is to be a harvest, a world-wide harvest of human souls, ransomed by him and raised into supernatural life. He knows that success must come through failure, triumph through suffering; he knows that the royal progress which befits Incarnate God is not this pageant of popular welcome, but that *via dolorosa* which he is to tread five days later, with his enemies reviling him and the crowds jeering at him. “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to me”; if I be lifted up, not upon a throne, but upon a cross. He thinks of that mysterious harvest of the Holy Eucharist, in which his natural body, in which he took flesh from his blessed Mother, is to be reproduced in all the myriad hosts of the world, to be the spiritual food of Christians, imparting life to them through its own death. “Our Lord”, says St. Ambrose, “was himself the grain that was to be mortified and to be multiplied; mortified by the infidelity of the Jews, multiplied by the faith of the Gentile peoples.”

But I wonder – when he spoke those words, wasn’t he thinking of something else as well? Wasn’t he thinking, perhaps, of Jerusalem, his own city, so faithless and so beloved; that had but now welcomed him in triumph, and was so soon to reject him? It was natural that he should be thinking about Jerusalem just then. He was revisiting it after an interval, at the risk of his life, for the great festival. He had approached it, that day, from the east, where you get, they say, the perfect view of it; had seen its walls and the roofs of the temple gilded with the spring sunshine – had seen it, and had wept over it. “If thou hadst known, in this thy day, the things that are to thy peace! But now they are hidden from thy eyes. For the days shall come when thy enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and beat thee flat to the ground, and shall not leave in thee a stone upon a stone.” The Hosannas of the crowd were still echoing in his ears; shall we not suppose that he was still thinking of Jerusalem, when he spoke those words about the grain of wheat?

You see, he loved the city. Loved it with that divine love which his Incarnation mirrored on earth; “the Lord loveth the gates of Sion more than all the tabernacles of Jacob.” Loved it, too, with a human love; for when he became man he would become complete man, sin only excepted; he would experience all the emotions which are proper to our nature – why, then, he too must have felt the thrill of patriotism; he must have known what it was to love places, because of the memories which they enshrined and the traditions which they preserved. Only, for him, that love was always clouded with sadness, because its memories for him were memories of benefits vainly bestowed; its tradition for him was one of ingratitude and rebellion. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldest not.” He loved his own city, and dropped natural tears over its apostasy from his heavenly Father, and from himself.

And yet, knowing as he did that within the lifetime of his generation that city would be razed to the ground, he recognized and accepted its fall as part of God's purposes. "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, itself remaineth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit"; so the destruction of that earthly Jerusalem was no loss in reality. Out of its ashes was to rise the heavenly Jerusalem; the Church of the Old Covenant was to be replaced by the Church of the New Covenant – the Catholic Church which he himself had come to found on earth. "Itself remaineth alone" – the city, perched up there on the hills which shielded it everywhere from attack, which seemed to keep every foreign influence at bay, was typical of that isolation in which the Jewish people lived, despising the Gentiles and keeping them at a distance, instead of asking whether God might not have a purpose for them too. "But that Jerusalem which is from above", says St. Paul, "is free, which is the mother of us all." The Church of the Old Covenant, buried under the ruins of what had been till now God's holy city, was to rise again a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, ransomed with the blood of Christ.

This principle, that a death is needed as the gateway to a resurrection, is verified not only in our Lord's life but in the life of his saints. Above all, in that of the martyrs; my text is used by the Church as a special Gospel, for example, for the feast of St. Laurence, the Roman deacon who was martyred just after Pope Xystus. From the earliest times, Christian people recognized that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. Their tombs, in those grim underground passages which you may still see at Rome, shot up above ground in a harvest of conversions and of repentances, procured by their intercession. Do we talk as if it were a thing of the past? Those relics of the catacombs still have power to work miracles above ground, as Europe knew a century ago, when St. Philomena's body, the body of a saint whose life and legend were unknown, was discovered by what seemed an accident, and a fresh crop of divine favors sprang from her forgotten sepulcher. So, they say, the grains of wheat buried in the tombs of the old Egyptian kings can be sown afresh, after all those centuries of darkness and neglect, and grow into flourishing plants. Dead and buried, yet still alive; rather, still alive because they were dead and buried.

And if that principle is verified in the lives of the saints, it is verified also in the life of the ordinary Christian. Every Christian life will be fruitful for God, exactly in proportion as it has been crucified with Christ, and buried with him, and lives now with that risen life of his which is the seed of the supernatural. You will see it especially, perhaps, in the lives of the religious; the sacrifice which men and women have made in devoting themselves to the life of the cloister, the breaking of the wills under the hard discipline of the novitiate, produces in them noticeably, even to us others, a kind of serene purposefulness which effects more, achieves more, than all the bustling activity of the un-supernaturalized character. If any of you heard or came across that light of the Dominican Order, whose early death we English Catholics have been mourning this last week, you will know what I mean. Father Bede Jarrett had natural gifts which would have marked him, I think, among his fellow men, whatever state of life he had embraced. And there must have been some who thought it a pity that one so talented should bury away his talents – so the world calls it – in the service of religion. But it was because it was buried away in religion that his life became so fruitful. That radiance – I know no other word for it – which those who met him even casually discerned in him was the effect, under God's grace, of a will beautifully mortified; it was the risen life shining through. And the great work which he achieved for his own Order and for the Church at large, the strong influence he had in so many lives, came from the same source; it was given to him to do a great deal in a short life, and a life which never seemed to be hurried, because, in St. Paul's phrase, he was dead, and his life was hidden with Christ in God. May he rest in peace after all his labor for souls.

And notice, once more, that this principle holds good not only in the life of individual Christians, but in the life of Christian institutions as well. The Christian Covenant cannot, indeed, be revoked, like the old

Jewish Covenant, and replaced by something better; we have our Lord's own promise that he will be with his Church to the end of time, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. Yet even the Church herself repeats through the ages, in a mystical sense, the history of her divine Master; she lives through a hundred deaths, and a hundred resurrections. She died under the persecutions, and rose again with Constantine; she died under the barbarian invasions, and rose again with Charlemagne; she died under the European apostasy of the sixteenth century, and rose again with the saints of the Counter-Reformation; she died with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, she rose again with the Catholic reaction which followed on them. "Still doomed to death, and fated not to die" – so wrote Dryden of the Church in England two and a half centuries back; and do we doubt, as we look around us today, that the prayers of our own martyrs have won for us a resurrection of Catholic life in England, whose scope is not achieved, whose vitality is not exhausted yet?

I stand before you to make an unusual appeal to your charity. The districts of Knowle and Dorridge were served, till the other day, by a church build during the war, and dedicated to our unknown warrior saint, St. George. It was a temporary church, built of wood; but, as is common in such churches, the ornaments inside were valuable out of proportion to the shell which enclosed them. There were Stations of the Cross, such as you might have expected them in a flourishing parish; there was a shrine to St. Philomena, whose name we were remembering just now. A few weeks ago, a fire broke out during the night, and the church was gutted, ornaments and all. The insurance money has sufficed to pay off the debt; and the little congregation of Knowle and Dorridge, some two hundred souls not much encumbered with worldly goods, find themselves back again just where they were in 1917, hearing Mass in a hotel and wondering where they are going to get a church from.

I would like to see your faces if you came to St. Catherine's one Sunday morning, and found a blackened ruin here with a notice on it to say that Mass was being said in the Grand Hotel. But remember, these poor people at Knowle are in a worse position than you would be; it is their own pinchings and savings for charity, these years past, that they have seen go up in smoke during a single night. St. Catherine's stood here before most of you were born; those Knowle Catholics love their church with a kind of motherly affection; it is the offering they themselves have made to God. And now it is a burnt offering.

Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit – why shouldn't that principle prove true, here too? Isn't it possible that this burial of their hopes which our brethren at Knowle are going through, the swallowing up in one night of all those little acts of self-denial which built the church for them, will bring them a harvest beyond their expectations? Will make it possible – that is their Rector's plan – to begin on a permanent church, once for all? It is possible; but we've got to help to make it possible; that's why I'm standing here. Oh, I know it's all very irregular, to appeal to Catholics for help in building a church somewhere else; but it's the kind of help which, just because the thing is no concern of yours, wins you more gratitude on earth, more favor in heaven. Why, a contribution made by a big church like this to a small parish half out in the country like Knowle has the same effect as giving a stick of chocolate to a child; the benefit you confer is out of all proportion to the expense you incur. Help them to build a more fitting home for our Lord's Eucharistic presence than they have had hitherto; throw your garments in his path, in the spirit of Palm Sunday – that new jumper you were going to buy, which you didn't really want. God will reward you for your charity; and St. Philomena, who's done such great things and still does such great things for her clients all over the world, won't forget the people who helped to build her shrine afresh. Dead, buried, and risen again – let that be the boast of St. George's, Dorridge, as it is the secret of sanctity, as it always has been, and always will be, the history of all Catholic endeavor. God bless you all, and give you a holy Passiontide, and a happy Easter.