

Speaking of Death

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Sooner or later, in Christian ministry, we find we are having to talk to somebody about death, their death or the death of a loved-one, and we are not going to do this very well if we have avoided thinking about death ourselves, avoided asking ourselves what death means—or should mean—for the Christian.

In St Peter's, Rome, there is a statue by Michelangelo. We have all at least seen photographs of it at some time or other. It is a *pietà*. That's to say, a statue of the dead Christ with his mother. We see the broken bloody corpse of Christ lying gently in the arms and lap of his grief-stricken mother, his head facing upwards, his torn limbs drooping down. The statue tells even the most casual tourist a simple story: this is a mother holding the dead body of her son.

But Michelangelo's *Pietà* does far more as well. It shows the deep trusting relationship that existed between the mother and the son. How many of us who have seen it cannot be moved by the face of Mary? She is truly beautiful and in a strange way serene. Her skin soft, gentle and warm. And in her beauty she shows her grief. In her tenderness is shown her pain. In the motherly embrace of her dead son is shown her great grief. The agony and joy of being a mother cry out at us from the stone.

Michelangelo uses other images to heighten our understanding and our empathy. We see, hidden under her garment, the gentle curve of her breasts—breasts which sustained life in the early months of her baby son. But above all there is the gaze of Mary into the face of her son—that gaze of total pity, total loss, total love.

In that look of love is told the complete story. The story of a family smashed, blown apart. The story of the innocent and seemingly unnecessary execution of the Son of God, and of Mary, a woman having to suffer what must surely be the greatest abomination human beings bear, the wasteful torturing and murdering of flesh of their own flesh.

The *Pietà* of Michelangelo, in addition to being a complete story, is a beautiful distillation of the theology of what took place at the execution of Christ. A few moments before his death, Christ, his body now racked and tortured, gazes down on the world which he came to redeem. His life-time is about to end. All that remains is for him to continue to look down on the world with unconditional pity,

unconditional grief. With his arms outstretched on the cross, holding the world and all it contains, he looks down with unconditional love.

It is his outstretched arms and his unconditional love for the whole world which are the great mystery of our faith. A mystery which is at the very centre of the Redemption. It is the unconditional loving by God that draws us to him.

What, though, do I mean by unconditional loving?

Unconditional love must have been given to very nearly all of us at least once in our lives. It is the love that is given without thought of gain, the kind that comes from the very centre of our being, that grabs us in the guts. But this still sounds rather abstract; more needs to be said.

Time and again I am asked the question: 'After I die will I see my husband—or wife—again in Heaven, or my mother or father or best friend? And this strikes me as a very basic question to ask. It is normally a question that is asked out of a sense of profound love for someone newly discovered or rediscovered. It is a question asked by people who have come to realise that their love for another person is so important or unconditional that it defines a part of what it means for them to be themselves. And this sheds some more light on our question, which we could now perhaps put as: 'In heaven will I be able to describe who I am?'

Let us try and unpack this idea just a bit. When we are born, we are born into an environment, a society, a family. We already have a family name, a token given to us to say that we belong to the family, that we are part of the lives of those people who have made the family what it is. When we are born, when our life-times begin, we arrive in the world as part of a story, part of the story of our family. We already have a long history.

As we mature, our life stories become entwined with other people's life stories. In ways ranging from bumpings into individuals in the street through to those close friendships which are sustained by free acts of trust and love, people share with others part of what it means for them to be who they are.

In close friendships we come to share intimately in others' life-stories, and the clearest place for us to see this enmeshing of life-stories is in the sacrament of marriage—though this is not to suggest that it cannot be found in other places besides.

In the sacrament of marriage, in the sight of the Church and within the power of God two separate life-stories are united together to form a unity. We say that two people are made husband and wife. But they are also expressing their love for each other, giving us a glimpse of the mystery of the love that God has for his world. When people make their marriage vows, 'I promise to have and to hold...', they are saying the obvious: 'I'll stick by you through the good times and the bad', but at a deeper level they are saying to each other, 'I will forgive you unconditionally forever.'

That is to say, a Christian marriage is formed when two people try to love each other in the same structural way as God loves us: a love that says 'I will forgive you unconditionally forever for all the things that you have done wrong and all the things that you will do wrong'. This is the love that will never maintain division, but will always welcome the other back and help to mend the other's wounds. A Christian marriage expresses a love that will grant to the other the freedom to grow, a love which gives respect and caring and helps the other to give respect and caring.

In the same way in which God loves his creation we, in our heavenly lives, will come to be able to enjoy the full beauty and the fullness of our loved one's love for us. It is by sharing in the mystery of why and how God loves his creation that we become part of his story. It is a story which will not pass away, and consequently, since we are enmeshed in that story, our stories will not pass away either, in spite of all that the forces of death and decay have in store for us.

There is, therefore, a closer link than we might realise between the love Christ showed on the cross, which conquered the powers of sin and death, and the love we can know in our ordinary day-to-day lives.

From the cross Christ was saying: 'I forgive you—the world—for all the wrongs that you have done and I will continue to do so for ever unconditionally. No matter what you do, no matter how far you run, no matter how much you hurt me by sin, I will carry on loving you. Even if you kill me. I will carry on loving you even when things are at their very worst, when all others have deserted you, when you are stricken, forlorn, rejected, when you are dead. I will hold you in my arms.'

When we die, which we will, we will lose everything. When we die, we will be like Christ was in his mother's arms, the Christ of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, broken, smashed, in the eyes of this world defeated.

In our death, in our utter nakedness, we will be confronted by Christ. It will not be a Christ waiting to judge, but a Christ with a gaze of absolute pity, absolute and unconditional love. Christ will gaze at us with the same tenderness as his mother gazes at him, in the *Pietà*. He will hold our smashed bodies, and he will cleanse them; he will raise them up.

This raising up, to share with Christ eternal life, is open to us. But it requires one thing: our ability to accept and act on Christ's unconditional love. We, ourselves, have at least to start learning to love and be loved unconditionally here and now.

This is our best way of preparing for death. What is 'heaven'? What is 'hell'? If we can't accept Christ's love unconditionally, if we continue to look inwards towards ourselves, live just for ourselves, depend just on ourselves, for eternity we will get ourselves and nothing else ... and that, surely, is what hell is. For what is heaven, where our life-stories finally come together, but our enjoyment of his unconditional love?