

AFTER TEN YEARS¹

HILARY J. CARPENTER, O.P.

Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee.—John 21, 17.

KNOWING his end to be drawing near—it was in fact the day before his death—Fr Vincent McNabb was concerned to make certain provisions for his funeral. Calling one of the younger brethren to him, he said to him: ‘Dear Father, I may well be dead tomorrow and there is a service I would ask of your charity. I don’t want a shaped and polished coffin such as they usually provide, nor should I like to have a brass factory-made cross on it nor be labelled with a brass label. I want an ordinary box made of the same sort of wood as this floor’—and he pointed with a smile to the common deal floor, uneven and knotted, which he had swept day by day with his bare hand, a floor such as had been his only bed for forty years and more. ‘You will want some measurements, of course; go and get a tape and measure me now; leave a bit extra length for me to stretch and plenty of room for the shoulders. When I am in the box and have been taken down to the church, bring away the lid and get out your brushes and black pigment and paint a cross on it, a good big one. Then you will want the inscription; I will dictate it to you: “*Ven. et Adm. R. P. F. Vincentius McNabb, O.P., S.T.M. Natus 8 Julii 1868. Professus 28 Nov. 1886. Mortuus*”—I don’t know the date, probably tomorrow, but anyway, “*1943 Londini*”. Now after that I want you to put a Greek inscription.’ He then recited by heart these words:

Κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας, σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε

They are the words of my text: ‘Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee’. ‘Then’, he continued, ‘after the *Requiem* and the *Libera*, to Kensal Green. I don’t wish to be taken there in a glass-house. Borrow the builder’s

¹ Text of a sermon preached by Very Rev. Fr Hilary Carpenter, O.P., Provincial, at the tenth anniversary memorial *Requiem* for Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P.

lorry and let down the sides. Put me on it, and let the two acolytes sit one on either side with their candles. (Don't light the candles; they will only get blown out.) Have the boy with the processional cross with his back to the driver's cab, and let me be driven to Kensal Green like that. Of course I know what some people will say: "That's McNabb and his tomfoolery, McNabb and his publicity, showing off." But it isn't that, my dear Father, it isn't that. All my life I have preached and when I am no longer alive I shall still preach. I shall preach even with my dead body. . . . Now of course I realise that I have a vow of obedience and you will need the Prior's permission to do all this.'

In these his last hours Fr Vincent was meeting death as he had lived his whole life. In the incident which I have related to you we may truly see a summary of his whole approach to his religious and apostolic life. His humour was there and his humanity, his obedience, his zeal for the preaching of the word of God, his deep sincerity and dislike of the sham, and above all as a central theme his profound and burning desire to love and serve our divine Lord. 'Do me a last favour, dear Father', he said to the same young priest. 'Read to me the Passion of our dear Lord according to St Mark.'

From his early youth he was absorbed in the pursuit of truth and its understanding, for he realised that truth wherever he might find it would help him to a knowledge and deeper understanding of the ultimate and eternal truth which is God himself. As a young Dominican, he told us, he would try with all his power to use the intelligence God had given him, to think. 'Think of anything', he would say to us, 'but for God's sake think.' He did not use that phrase lightly, as so many of us might. He meant literally that our thinking was for God's sake. All his own thought led him to God, and the fruit of his thinking was in every word he spoke or wrote.

But not even the ultimate truth, which is God himself, was for Fr Vincent something merely to be known. Truth was to be known in order that it might be loved; it is the greater knowledge of God that can best lead to a greater love of God.

As the inevitable outcome of this intense love of God in Fr Vincent came the scarcely less intense desire in him to bring all men, as far as in him lay, to this same knowledge and so to this same love of God. This love was a burning flame in him; it drove him into the highways and byways seeking souls; whether in the pulpit or in the public park, in the drawing-rooms of the rich or (as he preferred) in the houses of the poor, amongst university professors or working men, with Catholics or with those outside the fold, the truth he loved would be told and his very love of it seemed to show him the way. He was what is called a 'popular' speaker, and he was so in every sense of the word except in the modern accepted sense. He was always concerned to speak to the people, and it was his peculiar gift that he could speak intelligibly to people in every walk of life. But it was his method, not his matter, that varied according to the needs and capacity of his hearers. No matter what the audience, it was the truth, God's truth, that he told. He did not fear to speak to children on the profound mysteries of the Faith, nor did the childlikeness that remained with this Master of Theology to the end fail to win their interest or minister to their understanding. A true son of St Dominic, Fr Vincent was, like him, above all *Doctor Veritatis*—a Teacher of Truth.

Few priests have made a greater or more lasting impact on this country as a whole during the present century than Fr Vincent McNabb. He became something of a legend even in his own lifetime. He may have seemed to some to have been given overmuch to paradox, seemed something of a living paradox himself. This was partly because of his own uncompromising sincerity which stood out so forcibly in an age so much committed to what is sham and unreal. But it was still more because he was so well fitted by nature and grace to appreciate and to reflect the supreme paradox of Divine Truth Incarnate, Divine Truth which is not merely a Divine Idea but also a Divine Person, the Word made flesh, the Word which moves both mind and heart and which, so freely received, must be no less freely given to others.

He was an outstanding product of his family background

and unbringing where the deep, consuming faith of the Irish was grafted on to a practically minded and naturally philosophical stock. For him a Dominican vocation was the obvious, one might almost say the inevitable, one. The teaching of St Thomas Aquinas inspired by the apostolic spirit of St Dominic was wholly attractive and satisfying to his truth-loving and ardent character. The Order to which he knew himself called in his youth, and in which he was to prove himself so shining a light in his later years, is properly called the Order of Preachers, and its motto is the single word *Veritas*—Truth.

In him there was a rocklike and unquestioning faith and an unswerving loyalty to the teaching of the Church. Yet he knew that he must be prepared to give a reason for the faith that was in him, must be prepared to defend that loyalty. He knew too, none better, how the visible things of creation could help make manifest the invisible things of God. It was with this in his mind that he devoted himself to the deep study of philosophy, of theology and of Holy Scripture. Above all he steeped himself in the Gospel till it became alive for him and he found understanding and love of the Word of God in the Incarnation, found too his own divine commission to preach and to teach.

‘Lovest thou me more than these?’ asked our Lord of St Peter for the third time. ‘Lord, thou knowest all things’, answered Peter; ‘thou knowest that I love thee.’ And our Lord said to him: ‘Feed my sheep’. It was this greater love that gave to St Dominic the power and fruit that was in his preaching, moved men to call him ‘another Christ’ for the mind and heart of Christ that was in him. It is this greater love alone that guarantees the power and the fruit in the preaching of his sons, the Friars Preachers. And it was certainly the source of that most fruitful apostolate of the great Friar Preacher whose memory we recall today. When he was quoting the Greek text, Fr Vincent asked the young Father to verify it in the *Codex Sinaiticus* of which there was a copy in the library. ‘That early text will help to confirm my opinion that St Peter did not say “Thou knowest *that* I love thee” but “Thou knowest *if* I love thee”. I am at the end of a long life and even now I do not know if I

have loved our Lord as I ought.' But, after our Lord's reply, Peter could have had no doubt, for he was given the commission to feed the flock of the Good Shepherd, a commission given only to those who have that greater love. And that same commission was given so surely and so fruitfully to Fr Vincent.

Why are we concerned to keep his memory green? There are those who believe that Fr Vincent was a saint. We, his brethren, who knew him so intimately, though we would not by one word seem to arrogate to ourselves what is in the sole judgment of the Church, we saw in him at any rate this intense love of our Lord and of souls. We knew the almost unbelievable austerities of his daily life, his love of his brethren; we knew his personal humility, we whose feet he had kissed when he thought he had offended us, or worse still for us, when we had done him some hurt. In this learned Master of Theology and powerful preacher there was the simplicity of a child. While he was already a dying man prayers were asked for him from the Rosary Guild. They offered their Holy Communions, said rosaries, made visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and all these were inscribed upon parchment in the form of a Spiritual Bouquet. The Father concerned with the making of this looked for Fr Vincent and found him in the library. 'I have brought you a Spiritual Bouquet from the Rosary Guild, Father', he said. Fr Vincent came to him, with that wonderful smile, knelt at his feet and received the offering in his outstretched hands, while the tears of gratitude coursed down his lined face.

But yet it is not merely for his great qualities of soul, for the example of his virtues, that we strive to perpetuate his memory. 'I have preached all my life', he said, 'and when I live no longer I shall still preach.' As you are no doubt well aware, we hope to establish here at St Dominic's, London, the Father Vincent McNabb Memorial Centre. To this project His Eminence Cardinal Griffin has lent his warmest support and has specially blessed all those who play their part in its realisation. Financial help is being publicly asked, with his approval, for at least £3,000 will be needed. If we thus aim to perpetuate his memory it is not merely, as we have said, to recall a great personality and a life's work

which ended ten years ago; it is in order that we may continue, in our own several ways, that same Christlike apostolate with the example of this great Friar Preacher to guide us and his devotion to inspire us; it is that he may still preach through our means. We can hardly hope to measure up to his gigantic stature, but please God we may bring to the work something of his zeal for truth, something of his unswerving sincerity, and above all something of his burning and absorbing love of our Lord.

So many of us already owe him so much. We can best repay our debt by ensuring, in whatever way we can, that the good he wrought is not interred with his bones. There is only one other thing he himself would ask of us, as he so often asked in his lifetime, that we should pray for his soul. And we, who trust that the Lord he loved has taken him into the eternal happiness of heaven, nevertheless will make that prayer for him. May his great soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

THE ANGELS AND PRAYER

ELIZABETH STOPP

IT is the business of the angels to mediate between God and mankind, to make his wishes known to us by enlightening our intelligence so that we may see more clearly what God wants of us, and thus may run more freely in the way of his holy will. It is their office to draw us ever closer to that love and praise of God which is their very existence; but whatever they are doing to help us, their gaze remains fixed upon the eternal Godhead, the Blessed Trinity. We are told in the scriptures that the angels have eyes at the back of their head as well as the front; in fact, in Ezechiel's vision the cherubim and the very wheels upon which they move are studded with eyes: 'And their whole body and their necks and their hands and their wings and the circles were full of eyes, round about the four wheels.' (10, 12.) This is the symbolism, magnificent in itself, though humanly helpless in the face of the unutterable, by which the prophet tries to convey the truth that the angels never lose sight of God although they are at the same time wholly