

HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL OF FR CYPRIAN
16 APRIL 2019

On behalf of Fr Abbot and of the monastic community I would like to welcome you all to this funeral Mass for Fr Cyprian. I welcome friends from the course of his life and those who have known him here or elsewhere in his various roles in his monastic life, most recently as chaplain in St John's. Fr Cyprian was a very remarkable person, as we all know, handicapped from birth by cerebral palsy, but with great gifts in many different ways. There were gifts in languages, in poetry, in music and in spiritual writing. His life was not always easy nor did he always find it easy. Our most important task, as always in a Christian funeral, is for us to pray for him in this Mass, for the forgiveness of his sins and for his welcome into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our first reading today from the book of Lamentations begins by speaking of afflictions: 'My soul is shut out from peace; I have forgotten happiness' and 'brooding on my anguish and affliction is gall and wormwood'. Fr Cyprian wrote two books on the spiritual life *The Way of Paradox* on the teaching of Meister Eckhart and *The Path of Life*, adapted from his conferences as novice master. In both of these he is characteristically honest and direct about the place of suffering in Christian life. Towards the end of *The Way of Paradox* (pp120ff), he writes that suffering is inevitable and that we have to accept this, and it is only in the measure that we do this, that we find it is neither meaningless nor unjust. There is only one way to overcome suffering, he wrote, and that is to unite with God. So we find the truth then of the words that followed from Lamentations and that fit with Fr Cyprian's understanding: 'This is what I shall tell my heart and so recover hope: the favours of the Lord are not all past ... every morning they are renewed ... My portion is the Lord says my soul ... The Lord is good to those who trust him, to the soul that searches for him. It is good to wait in silence for the Lord to save'.

Essentially it is the same message in the Gospel reading, St Mark's account of Jesus' death and resurrection, which seemed an appropriate choice for a funeral in Holy Week, as is Lamentations. Fr Cyprian, in line with many other Christian writers, sees this holding together of death and new life as the central Christian paradox, which in *The Way of Paradox* he describes thus (p 27): 'The way of opening the Wisdom-Eye through paradox and the clash of contraries will remind many people of Zen; and indeed there is a certain similarity, though Eckhart's way is totally Christian, founded on the mystery of the cross and the resurrection, in

which the perception of unity in the clash of opposites is realized to the highest degree.’ He retained an interest in Buddhist thinking and in all searches for truth right to the end, as the books by his bedside in hospital bore witness.

Fr Cyprian was novice master to a number of us brethren here, myself included. His spiritual conferences as novice master later became his book *The Path of Life*, but his spoken word as written down in a notebook has still an enduring immediacy of presence. On this same theme of the centrality of death and resurrection, there is this from the 20th of April 1991. He spoke of Tertullian on the absurdity of the Cross and then he went on ‘but suffering has to be undergone rather than to be talked about. Suffering breaks the mind by its pointlessness in order to let the divine light in’. He went on: ‘the cross strips away all that is superficial and leads us to the essential and the most basic, to the ground of the soul. The resurrection is outside time, space, matter. It leads us into the very mystery of God, the eighth day’.

Fr Cyprian was a very honest person, sometimes quite painfully, there were likes and dislikes and not much, if any, diplomatic sugar coating. In a homily once to the school, when it was still an all boys’ school and much addicted to the singing of ‘Jerusalem’, he said ‘Ah, you like to sing about building Jerusalem in this green and pleasant land, but you are not so good at doing it, are you?’ On my last visit to him, a week last Saturday, he seemed to be sleeping deeply nearly unconscious but I tried saying ‘Cyprian?’; ‘yes’ he said. ‘How are you?’ I asked; ‘awful’ he replied. To my rather inane ‘but you look very peaceful’, he deigned no reply. Besides the honesty, there were eccentricities, which in some ways increased with time as can happen as the inhibitors erode, a muttering under the breath which could be quite unnerving. Who will forget the sudden bursts of song from his room in the monastery? He liked a good joke, so much so that he would tell the same ones often; naughty novices would keep a tally of the retellings.

His last weeks and months in St Catherine’s nursing home were in many ways an exile, with a real increase in physical suffering, undoubtedly painful for him and disturbing for visitors. He became quite preoccupied, at times morbidly, with the current difficulties and problems of the monastic community.

Still on two different occasions he spoke to me about this time as an extended retreat, something he had asked for earlier in his monastic life but which had been refused. I visited him on the afternoon of Christmas day this year and for a reason which I cannot put into words I left uplifted, but I suppose it had something to do with this laser sharp experience of the paradox of life in death, finding in suffering

and death a path of life. It mattered for him that the first word of the Rule was 'listen' and the last word 'arrive': if you listen, a lifelong listening, you will arrive; this came in conferences on the Rule in December 1990.

But it is also clear that for him this 'arriving' was not to be contained and securely held within the frame of this life. I think Fr Cyprian said one of the most arresting things I have ever heard, which I have remembered from that day on, though I need that notebook of mine to tell me that it came in a conference on the 24th of November 1990. It was a snowy winter and I was feeling at a low ebb at the 9 month point of my first year as a novice. The conference was about holiness, which he said was not about externals of religious life, nor religious experience, including in time of prayer, it was not about supernatural gifts or powers. Fundamentally, he said, holiness is a reorientation of one's attitude to things, of one's way of being. What is at the centre: God or self? Perhaps in this life we never fully overcome the astigmatism of self at the centre. We have to let go of the preoccupation with self and stop taking ourselves too seriously. Our attitude to ourselves, this is vintage Cyprian, should be humorous and compassionate detachment. There followed a favourite image, which comes into his books: we should be at once virgin and wife: virgin in being detached, in freedom, in giving and letting go; wife in striving with fiery longing for God who is sought in all things. Then came the bit that stunned me: hold to patient perseverance and never give up. You will be tempted to say 'I am not getting anywhere'. Well, you do not know and in any case in monastic life, there is nowhere to get. Almost on the last page of *The Way of Paradox* (p129), he writes 'precisely because God is transcendent, and in this life we can never lay hold of him definitively, we can never say that we have 'found', that we have 'arrived', that we now 'know what it is all about'.'

I suppose the key phrase here is 'in this life' and our purpose here today is to pray for Cyprian, that purged of his sins he will indeed find and he will arrive.