

**Staveley Parish Church**  
**2009 Holy Week: Addresses after Mass**

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In the news yesterday morning there was an item about face transplants. Professor Peter Butler was talking about his work on face transplantation. This is of some interest to me, not particularly from a medical point of view: transplanting a face technically is no more than the kind of very careful craftsmanship that a restorer of ancient documents or paintings might use. The interest comes from the fact that when I was a Professor of Anatomy in Dublin I taught him, and employed him for a year. That is as near to fame as I'm likely to get. And there's another source of fascination in this, and it's to do with faces.

The squeamishness of the public concerning face transplants, and the moral questions that arise, reflect that fact that the face is what defines a person, even a personality for some people. The word person comes from *persona*, mask, which seems to imply that we all put on a mask to cover up our true selves. Is this also the sin of Adam? The face houses the organs of smell, taste, sight, and the most touch-sensitive parts of the body. The organs of hearing are not far away. The face is in a quadruped (and as apes we are just modified quadrupeds) the first part of the body to go into a new environment. It is the part of the body that confronts, as we heard in the Old Testament lesson: 'I gave my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.' The muscles of the face are called *mimetic* muscles because they *mimic* our emotions, communicating them to the observer. The brain connexions of the nerves that supply these facial muscles are specially protected from disease. I could go on: let's just say that the face is of peculiar interest to me. And not just to me, it seems, but also to Holy Scripture.

Faces play a surprisingly big part in Holy Scripture. The word face appears 25 times in Genesis alone. The Lord setting his face towards, or against, or hiding his face, or showing his face to someone or other. In the Gospels, Jesus comes down from the transfiguration mountain with a shining face. Think how the face is radiant in people who are doing exactly what they are put on the earth to do: shining with joy. Look at a photograph of the just ordained (but hurry up before the radiance is wiped off their faces by the realities of ministry). Then a few pages later, Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Not joy this time, but gritted determination. Indeed, he sets his face like flint—which is the phrase used in tonight's OT lesson: 'The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have *set my face* like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.' In yesterday's talk I mentioned again and again the need to face our demons. I talked about *imago Dei*, the face of God that we see in Paul's mirror,. And when we do see clearly, the face of God is actually our own face. It is, as I said yesterday, as if I am God seeing myself as God sees me.

We see with our eyes and our eyes are watered by tears. The psalmist's tears wetting his couch in his hours of distress, crying in the daytime. But tears of joy too. Tears that cleanse our faces. Tears in that most beautiful of Andersen's stories, and one full of religious allegory, that melt the heart of ice that the Snow Queen has wrought in Kay. Tears of love that alone enable the ice blocks to spell the word eternity and allow Kay and Gerda to enter together. Eternity, here and now, out of time. The love that wilt not let me go. The love that gives its all for me, as will I for my children. The love that is Christ's blood.

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What an extraordinary statement that is: the love that is Christ's blood. The film Gandhi again, when early in the film, Gandhi and Charlie Andrews on a crowded train, and Andrews invited up to the roof. An Indian says to him 'I have friends who are Christian: they eat flesh and drink blood every Sunday.' It's meant to be a friendly greeting! In today's culture of flesh-eating zombie films and vampire films and video games, Christianity has a hard time getting through to the unchurched used only to these ghoulish images of flesh and blood. And I have a confession to make: I would be ashamed to tell you how very recently it was that the penny dropped about the real significance of blood in Christian theology, and the reason for this is that I looked on blood from a medical point of view, whereas the key to the issue is in the layman's point of view.

Picture someone attacked in the street, lying bleeding in the gutter. As the blood seeps away, so does the life-force. Lack of blood equals death, so *blood equals life*. For Jews and Muslims, ritual preparation of meat to eat involves draining all the blood so that they are not guilty of consuming the God-given 'life force'. The blood that marks the doorposts in the first Passover (Exodus) signifies that the house will be preserved: *blood equals life*. And so the blood of Jesus, the blood that flows from his crucified side gives

life to the world. All the references to blood of Jesus in Holy Scripture and in many rather gruesome hymns refer to the giving of life. The sacrifice on the cross is life giving for exactly this reason.

Some parallels can be drawn between the blood that circulates in our vessels and the blood of Jesus.

- Blood brings nutrient to the cells of the body. What more nutritious than the Sermon on the Mount, the two great commandments, the parables?
- Blood contains red cells that bring oxygen to the tissues. Jesus brings us the oxygen, the clear air of his life. Get rid of the smoke of duty and shoulds, and instead take up the clear air of freedom from earthly burdens. We are in the world, but not of the world. This is yet another parallel with Buddhist teaching, and Hindu.
- Blood contains white cells that fight disease and maintain health. Isn't that exactly what the teachings and example of Jesus can do for us.
- Blood removes rubbish from the tissues of the body, and contains platelets that plug holes in the blood vessels. The resources of the Christian church are there for us when we feel burdened, and life overcomes us. *Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.*

So now when I hear of the 'blood of the lamb', I understand it as, quite simply, the will to do the will of God, that is, obedience to God. As St John's Gospel has it: 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you shall not have life within you' (John 6:53).

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All this talk of blood and eating and drinking is bringing us close to tomorrow, to the last supper, to the mass and to how Christianity works—the process of salvation, redemption, call it what you will. Here are a few images of this process.

- First the universe as a giant egg-timer. At the annunciation the sand begins to enter the part that narrows down, through the nativity to reach the crucifixion/resurrection—the very narrow bit—after which the universe expands once more, full of new life and new possibilities. The Christ-event gives us a new way of looking at the world.
- Or a biological model. Every cell of our body contains all our genes. They map all our family history, species history, and animal history. Each and every cell includes genetic information from the moment of creation. Through Christ the cardinal point, cosmic history is concentrated for one brief moment into the unicellular conceptus, the cosmic zygote. The entire universe of the monochromatic old covenant sucked into this singularity, then in an instant transformed in Mary the God-bearer, bursting forth into the polychromatic new covenant: 'through the incarnation, the future of God is already in the world, and He opens to us access to our salvation, namely, to participate in the future of God. Past, present and future meet at the moment of consecration in the Mass. *Ratzinger*: 'When the eternal word assumed human existence at his Incarnation, he also assumed temporality. He drew time into the sphere of eternity. Christ is himself the bridge between time and eternity ... In the Word incarnate, who remains forever, the presence of eternity with time becomes bodily and concrete.'
- Or cosmology. The crucifixion/resurrection is a bit like the implosion of a star into the black hole followed by rebirth into a new universe: Jesus Christ drawn by the gravitational pull of Golgotha, only to emerge in an instant resurrected in glory.
- Or, finally, bathos. Like Julie Andrews and Dick van Dyke in *Mary Poppins* jumping through the pavement into a brightly coloured new world where everything is supercallifragilisticexpialidocious. No, maybe not.

Whatever image you choose, we are talking about the Christ-event as a whole. Some Christians say we are saved by the cross: not I. Some Christians say we are saved by the resurrection: not I. Some Christians say we are saved by the cross *and* resurrection: not I. I say we are saved by the *whole process* from creation through incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, pentecost, and again and again, every time we recognise the Holy Spirit at work within us.

God became man and suffered all men's woes. *God enters man*. That is love. Through the resurrection man is reborn – a constant cycle of death followed by resurrection: eternal regeneration, eternal Eucharist, a kind of re-incarnation. *Man enters God*. That is love. *Admirabile commercium*.

St Isaac: Union with God is a mystery that is worked out in human persons. The personal character of a human being who has entered on the way of union is never impaired, even though he renounces his own will and his natural inclinations. This is how the human personality comes to its full realization in grace.

God is love and love is God. Let us never think we are too sinful or unprepared to meet him. The father always welcomes home the penitent. Jesus is love and love takes many forms so Jesus takes many forms. Love guides but does not insist. It stands alongside. It surprises. It is sometimes angry—hatred of wrongdoing. It is not always 'nice' and it is never bland or anodyne. This sounds like the hymn to love in

1 Corinthians. That is what Jesus is like. And we can see him if we try in every situation and every person. Jesus and love are often unseen until they have gone – like the road to Emmaus.

*Schweitzer:* He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who did not know who he was. He says the same words, 'Follow me!', and sets us to those tasks which he must fulfil in our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether wise or unwise, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the suffering that they may experience in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

We come to this self-giving love in the Mass, and I want to close with quotations from two English churchmen whose writings mean a great deal to me. The first, by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, is probably unfamiliar to you. The second, by his pupil George Herbert, is much better known.

Christmas 1620

In the old Ritual of the Church we find that on the cover of the canister, wherein was the Sacrament of His Body, there was a star engraven, to shew us that now the star leads us thither, to His body there.

And what shall I say now, but according as St. John saith, and the star, and the wise men say, 'Come.' And He, Whose the star is, and to Whom the wise men came, saith, 'Come.' And let them who are disposed, 'Come.' And let whosoever will, take of the 'Bread of Life, which came down from Heaven' this day into Bethlehem, the house of bread. Of which Bread the Church is this day the house, the true Bethlehem, and all the Bethlehem we have now left to come to for the Bread of life, - of that His life which we hope for in Heaven. And this our nearest coming that here we can come, till we shall by another *venite* come, unto Him in His Heavenly Kingdom to which He grant we may come, That this day came to us in earth that we thereby might come to Him and remain with Him for ever, 'Jesus Christ the Righteous.'

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here;  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I, the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, the incarnation of love, whose suffering, death and resurrection transforms us, and whose righteousness dawns upon the world scattering the darkness of sin, death and injustice, grant us grace and glory.

I wish you all a very happy Easter. Thank you for listening so attentively and courteously.

Amen.