

Orphans

My mother had just died, predeceased by my father some thirty years earlier. Someone came up to me and said to me, “You poor thing! Now you’re an orphan!” That thought, true as it was, had not crossed my mind since I was pushing fifty at the time, and one usually thinks of children being orphaned rather than adults. Yet there I was, bereft of living parents. Poor thing indeed!

I was reminded of this as I listened to Philippe Meyer one day as Nelson Mandela lay on what everyone assumed was his deathbed. Now Philippe Meyer is a commentator on France-Culture radio, and his commentaries are reminiscent of Andy Rooney’s – except with a decidedly sophisticated French flair instead of American folksy. He, as usual, addressed us as “Listeners who know how to listen”, and then began to comment on the agitation which gripped the populace as the “Father of South Africa” prepared to exit the stage. While recognizing the pain brought about by the impending loss, and perhaps more by the disruption to familiar and comfortable life situations caused by the disappearance of a significant cog in that life apparatus, he nonetheless pointed out the obvious – namely, that death is an inevitable part of life. Permit me to add that it is also not the end.

First of all, death is not the end for the person undergoing it. Our personal death is not to be feared; those of us who believe in the Resurrection can face it with confidence – as is the case with those who freely choose to forego medical treatments which provide no real benefit, but which instead only prolong the separation anxiety. In a sense, this is how Philippe Meyer saw the frantic prayers for Mandela’s healing: a refusal to let him go. Thus, there they stood, waiting for the bad news.

Neither is death the end for those who cling to the dying person; life goes on, and they must deal with the new situation, however frightening or uncertain it may be. The challenge is also an opportunity for rebirth: as generations pass away, a new generation is not only allowed but also forced to step in, bringing renewed vigor and new vision. Philippe Meyer encouraged the South Africans to stop worrying about being orphans, seizing instead the opportunity to grow to the political and social adulthood which is Mandela’s legacy. Meanwhile, it’s my generation’s turn to step up and face the grim reaper. (Gulp!)

During this month of August, all of us will - at one point or other - celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration. Perhaps the apostles on Mount Tabor were as stuck as Mandela’s followers – except that it was not bad news that held them in its grip, but rather good news. The vision of Christ’s true glory held the apostles transfixed, enthralled – so much so that they did not want it to end. “And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah’ (Matthew 17:4).” Jesus would have none of it, however: “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear’... And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, ‘Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead’ (Matthew 17: 7, 9).” In other words, “No, you can’t

stay up here and lollygag; there's work to be done, so get off this mountain and go to it!" The temptation to inertia was and is very strong; was this not, after all, the very temptation put before Faust by the diabolically clever Mephistopheles? "O moment, stay, thou art so fair!"

Jesus says, "I will not leave you as orphans (John 14: 18)." We are not to remain bereft like children without parents, or to cling to memories of happier and more secure times. Rather, we are to grow up and face the future with hope, courage, and conviction, making our contribution to bringing about Christ's Kingdom of justice and peace. Isn't that what we are encouraged to do by the Letter to the Ephesians? "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4: 11-13)." As Philippe Meyer ends every broadcast, "May heaven keep you in joy!"

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