

## Pluscarden Abbey: Homilies

### Good Friday, 2010

Just over a hundred years ago, the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke devoted a sonnet to an ancient statue in the Louvre. It was a torso - nothing more. It was a torso of Apollo. The poet, ostensibly a living flesh and blood man, is standing in front of this broken stone statue. And yet, headless and truncated though it is, this statue seems more luminous than he. He compares it to a candelabrum. It is "suffused with brilliance from inside"; it gleams, it smiles, it glistens; it even bursts like a star upon the poet. And he ends, addressing himself: "... here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life... denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben aendern." [Repeat].

In Apollo, more than any other god, was embodied all the grace of ancient Greece. He was its epitome: order, justice, beauty, healing, music, all were his. Such a figure, such a force that even a torso, more than 2000 years after its carving, could look at a poet and change him. Today, with the altar stripped, saints veiled, the words of Isaiah and Hebrews and John resounding, we are before our Apollo, the true Apollo, the epitome of God's grace, broken on the cross. Today, not in a museum, but in a Liturgy alive with the Spirit, there is a corpus, a body, before our eyes, "suffused with brilliance from inside". Today, Good Friday, here, before the Crucified, "there is no place that does not see [us]".

Here, spontaneously, Rilke's words may come to us: "you must change your life."

Here it may come to us - I quote a Benedictine - that "the most passionately protected thing in us is our mediocrity, our fundamental indecision in respect of life." Something we will murder to protect, Lord have mercy on us.

Yes, this is the extraordinary thing. *Fulget crucis mysterium*, as the old Latin hymn has it. On this dark day, when the sun went into eclipse, "the mystery of the Cross shines", *fulget crucis mysterium*. It shone for the three Marys standing by the cross. It shone for the beloved disciple. It shone for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as they carried the corpus to the tomb.

What is asked of us is simply that we, Rilke-like, let it shine - on us.

"Dear friends, said Pope St Leo one 5th c. Holy Week, when Christ is lifted up by the Cross, our mind's eye should not light just on what evil men could see... They could see nothing in the Crucified Lord beyond their crime... Our minds, however, enlightened by the Spirit of Truth, should recognize with a pure and free heart the glory of the Cross shining in heaven and on earth. They should see with interior penetration what the Lord said just before his Passion, 'The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified'" (Sermon 59, 6).

What did the mother of Jesus see as she looked at her son? What did Mary her sister see, and Mary Magdalene, and the disciple Jesus loved? Surely St. Leo is right. They loved. Therefore they saw beyond the crime.

There was failure enough - real, deep, guilty failure, everywhere. There was the failure of Israel in her appointed representatives, the Sanhedrin, the failure of the clerical establishment we may say. There was the failure of Pilate, representative of Roman law, the failure of human justice. There was the failure of Judas, Peter, and the others, the failure of friends and intimates, the failure of ordinary love. Religion failed, State and society failed, friendship failed. These three failures make a sacrament of the failure of humanity itself.

Mary and her companions saw all that, felt all that - like a sword in the heart - but they must have seen beyond - "enlightened by the Spirit of Truth, with a pure and free heart, with interior penetration."

There was the physical and mental agony of the dying Jesus. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "I thirst". This agony was like a sacrament of all human suffering and all human dying, that of the child, that of the old, that of the bed-ridden, that of the tortured.

Mary, Mary and Mary, and the disciple Jesus loved, saw all that, felt all that, would, could never forget it. But "enlightened by the Spirit of Truth, with a pure and free heart, with interior penetration" they still could see this suffering, this Sufferer, "suffused with brilliance from inside". They could see this nailed corpus glow, glisten, shine. *Fulget crucis mysterium*. "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified."

One might even venture this. Mary saw what Jesus knew but could not, then, feel. What Jesus knew remained in her. It remained in God the Father, the invisible witness of everything. And by the Holy Spirit it lives in us in the measure of our faith. What Mary saw was something being given. At the very moment everything she loved: the beauty of her Apollo, her Jesus, the loyalty of his friends, the glory of her people, at the very moment all this was being taken away; at the very moment every hope of her

Magnificat was being broken, through the cleft of her broken heart, she saw. Fulget Crucis mysterium. She saw a gift being given. In a little while, in the Upper Room, the disciples would see it. At the Easter Vigil every year we see it. But today, iuxta crucem, by the Cross, she saw it already. She saw: the outstretched arms; "Father, forgive them for they not what they do"; "Today, you will be with me in paradise"; the seamless tunic left untorn; "Woman, behold your son...Behold your mother"; "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit"; "It is accomplished"; "and immediately there came out blood and water." These were all like leaves falling from the tree of the Cross, from the man felled in his prime. They were like the flotsam and jetsam washed up from an ocean of agony. They were the distillations of his wounds. They were sparks falling from the fire of his love. Hints, fragments, each of them, but carrying the whole. And "enlightened by the Spirit of truth, with a pure and free heart, with interior penetration", Mary - with Mary and Mary, with the beloved disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, even hesitant Nicodemus - Mary saw, they each of them saw, the gift being given. And they gathered the broken pieces into their hearts, hearts tomb-like with pain, and there the Giver and the gift were laid and lived and shone. And in the heart of faith and the heart of the Church, always has and always will.

"Here there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life." Fulget crucis mysterium. Yes, today, a gift is given. It doesn't have a single name, except perhaps the Holy Name. It has many. Each of us could choose one and ponder it for the rest of the day. Take, for example, that exquisite phrase of St Leo, echoed in last week's Liturgy: *sensum confitendae tuae majestatis totus mundus accepit*, from the Cross "the whole world receives the meaning of what it is to worship". For when we receive that gift - worship - we receive everything. We are freed from worshipping and protecting our own mediocrity. We are freed from our fundamental indecision. We are freed to make a gift to the Father and each other of all our living and dying and rising.

But enough! Fulget crucis mysterium; the mystery of the Cross shines out. Rilke-like, may we allow it to look at us; Mary-like, may we accept its gift. May it change our lives!

Fr. Hugh, O. S. B.