SHOULDERING THE LAMB

Speech by Aidan Mathews

At the launch of ‘Shouldering the Lamb: Reflections on an Icon’ by Archbishop Richard Clarke

Late in this learned yet very lenient reflection, Bishop Richard references a notorious online pseudo-blog which purported at the time to be the work of a young lesbian fabulist in war-torn Syria, but which turned out in the end to be the confection of a middle-aged heterosexual male confabulator in Scotland; and I feel I’m here this evening under somewhat similar false pretences myself, because, of the seven sacraments in my particular religious tradition, I’ve received each and every one (two of them, be it said, multitudinously) bar holy orders, the audacity of which vocation and/or provocation is basic to this book.

How then can I presume to introduce an extended meditation which I take to be about the privilege and precariousness of priesthood, the more so since the general culture, far from shouldering the shepherd, let alone the lamb, has been pretty well cold-shouldering pastors and all their presumptions since well before the start of the third millennium? As the prestige of the metaphysician passes to the physician, and that of the confessor to the consultant psychiatrist, those who were once elect are now largely reprobate, often ridiculed and sometimes reviled. This is excellent theology, mind you, but very bad timing, except for the new narcissists. In an odd recrudescence of retro-clericalism among very pious youngsters (in Papal terms the Franciscan-hating Benedictines), they are signing up for those institutes and congregations that let them wear fancy-dress, and face East, and turn plain cups into precious chalices. “That’s my bit”, one of them protested recently at Sunday Mass, when the congregation joined in the Doxology.

“The Lord shepherds me”, says the Greek translation of the 23rd psalm in the Septuagint, and that transformation of nouns into verbs, of religious administration into Christian ministry, can be a bold and bloody, not to say bloody-minded, affair, however placid and peaceable last Sunday’s first lectionary reading from second Isaiah was. When I was caddying for my Dad somewhere in Kerry during the second Vatican Council, he abandoned me with one of his putters in charge of a lambing ewe while he searched the locale for the absentee farmer. I was to strike with attitude at the hooded crows when they went for the soft parts of the newborn face, its tongue and eyes, but I could let them lunge at the placenta, when it passed. And I’m also old enough to remember Greece under the colonels, where the border-guards would cut the hippies’ hair at the Yugoslav frontier, and where I once met an aged shepherd in the Cretan interior, black-booted and, yes, beautiful, who was carrying a sheep in the prescribed postcard manner - along, be it said, with a marksman’s rifle that had telescopic sights.

Of course, today’s predators are rarely carnivorous birds or coyotes. In point of fact, the flock of the faithful is sometimes much more lethal and Orwellian in its fierce *four-legs-good-two-legs-bad* fashion than any lone wolf, although it must be admitted, even in the presence of an archbishop, that some of our overseers should take responsibility for their more egregious oversights. A lot of us in the laity are admittedly dyed in the wool - mutton dressed as ram, you might say - and it’s hard at times to discern the scapegoat in the black sheep, or the Lamb of God in the scapegoat, or the casualty in the culprit and the criminal, especially since the protocols of contemporary victimhood encourage wronged parties to become prosecutors in the press instead of Paracletes in the pews. There is nothing plaintive, as it were, about many of those who are busily bringing suit in the tabloids and the broadsheets. After all, it’s only the ancient gods, the Elohim, that strange plural with a singular verb, who call for Isaac’s murder, and it’s only Yahweh, the brand-new divinity on the Biblical block, who cries halt to every holocaust, and who thereby commissions the religious project par excellence, the proper priestly endeavour for each and every one of us: that’s to say, the transformation of sacrifice as slaughter of the alien into sacrifice as self-effacing service of the other.

Small wonder, then, given the laxity of the laity, that our more devout and dutiful minders in the clergy are often tormented as much by their own virtues as by our vices, by their expectations as by our excesses. Idealism, after all, can be a form of idolatry too. Whether leader or led, it seems that we must cherish imperfection or go mad. “I am not Jesus Christ and neither was He,” was a daily offering of the late poet James Simmons, Lord have mercy on him, albeit with an upper-case capital H on the masculine pronoun; and it’s an important insight, it seems to me, particularly for those of us who are by preference or by predicament Synoptic rather than Johannine Christians. Bishop Richard presents a mighty procession of magnificent pastors, chief among them the timely R.S. Thomas and the timeless George Herbert, the two foremost Anglican Catholic poet-priests in our language, the former rector a reminder to us all that some forms of temperamental affliction can be fertile varieties of good grief, and should not be pathologized because of a clinical deficit in the man’s dopamine levels, and the latter reverend a reminder that some forms of contemplative vision are not invalidated by a probable surfeit of serotonin in the frontal cortex of his seventeenth century brain.

Here, I have to confess, I’ve fallen far short. Father Joe Veale, a Jesuit whose Mass I served in short trousers half a hundred years ago, told me two things, as I was leaving school for college: that anything still on the Index was well worth reading, and that a fellow could measure his spiritual maturity by the natural progression in his reading habits from one lyrical shepherd to another, from the boisterous verse of exhibitionistic John Donne to the clarity and calm of the mild and mystical George Herbert; yet, even now in my seventh fallen and wall-fallen decade, I’d prefer to swill a pint of wine with early, middle, or late Jack Donne than to drink daily from the limpid chalice of St. George Herbert’s holiness. To be sure, every line of every poem he left us reports like a pistol shot as crisply as the fraction of the host; Donne, on the other hand, is less B.D. and more B.O. I am wholly at home in him. As my Dad, who was Catholic and anti-clerical, liked to say: *Stick with the whiskey priests. Better a plastered saint than a plaster one*. And he had a signed copy of Graham Greene’s Power and the Glory on his book-shelf to prove it.

But the greatest peril for the professional or career Christian like ourselves is to disguise the fragility of his/her faith. “Great doubt, great faith”, said the Little Flower. “Small doubt, small faith”; and, at sixteen, she was spot-on. Now I’m not suggesting that priests swap sins with their penitents, which was, in fact, the early practice of Francis Xavier, but when there’s a pregnant pause, a sort of caesura, between our home-grown feelings at the angle-poise in the study and our homiletic flow at the lectern in the church, we are doing what Bishop Synesius of Cyrene incorrectly boasted about to a correspondent in the fifth century: “In private, I philosophize”, he wrote. “In public, I mythologize.” That is a hairline fracture in prayer and practice that can only fester.

Let me finish with a breach of copyright by quoting, not from the beloved diary of the country priest that Archbishop Clarke commends at the start of his spirited sharing, but from a private letter I got last week from a priest down the country. I don’t think he’s ever published an article or a book review or, God forbid, a letter to the editor, though he’s good on parish notices, and he will heartily enjoy Shouldering the Lamb when a snail-mail copy reaches him early in the season of Epiphany. He may actually be one of the few persons in the whole country who’s *not* writing a book. In that sense, he’s known only to God, which is an extraordinary achievement in the age of Facebook, Linked-In, Snapchat, and YouTube.

This is what he said; or, rather, this is what he *says*:

“I have worked in the gloom of people’s grief, moved about amid the noise and confusion of their conflict, and talked when I could make myself heard. I have eaten my bread salted with their tears, my fingernails dirty from the grime of our broken lives, and I have laughed and celebrated the arrival of every new-born infant come among us in splendid individual perfection. I have coaxed and encouraged the fragile, loved the sight and the smell of them in all their idiosyncrasy, and considered myself blessed when they groaned in the night and cried out for help. The Lord Jesus was always there in the sweat and the muck and the fever of the struggle that we share.”

Aidan Mathews

Advent 2017