

A Meditation on the Death of Richard Plater

Richard Plater died at 3:30 on Christmas morning. His death was surrounded by a great cloud of worship, the song of human beings and angels giving glory to God for the birth of Jesus Christ. As he lay dying, midnight mass was being celebrated around the world, starting in New Zealand and the western Pacific and spreading westward as the world turned, in the archipelagos and steppes of Asia, in the vast continent of Africa, on the battlefields of Iraq, in the old churches of Europe and the British Isles, in the New World of North and South America, and ending, while he died, in Alaska and the islands of the eastern Pacific.

And as he died, Christians in Europe and Africa were hearing the powerful gospel of Christmas Day: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The Word became flesh in a simple way, nothing special, no extraterrestrial upheaval or dramatic appearance, no tsunami rippling across the southern seas, just an ordinary human event, the birth of a baby. Jesus Christ was born from the womb of his mother Mary. So too Richard Plater was born from the womb of his mother Anna. So too all of us were born from the womb of our mother, giving her physical pain and spiritual joy and giving us the shock of expulsion from solitary warmth and darkness into light and noise, heat and cold, and, most alarming of all, the presence of others. Birth is the first great mystery of life, and no one has ever figured out a better way of bringing human beings into the world.

Death is the second great mystery. When the time came for Jesus Christ to die, he was nailed to a wooden cross, and the cross was placed upright in a hole in the ground. He hung there for several hours until he died. The nails did not kill him, or the spear which a soldier poked into his side. He died from the unsupported weight of his body, which increasingly made it difficult for him to breathe. After a time, exhausted by his weight, when he had gasped his last words, his lungs failed him, and after a little his heart, deprived of oxygen, stopped, and then his brain, deprived of blood, ceased to function, and he was dead. Richard Plater died not of the weight of his body but of the weight of years. His body gradually wore out, and on the night of his death it could no longer sustain his breathing. He struggled for breath, and then his lungs stopped, and his heart stopped, and his brain stopped. In much the same way all of us will die. Early or late, painful or easy, slow or quick, one by one our vital organs will cease to function, and we will die.

Some say that death is the end of human existence. When our body ceases to live, they say, we cease to be alive. In the gospel read at funerals, Jesus Christ shows a different reality. His friend Lazarus has become ill, and Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, send him a message, asking him to come quickly. They want Jesus to perform a miracle, preventing death. But Jesus delays a couple of days, and when he finally comes Lazarus is already dead and buried, his body beginning to smell. Jesus stands outside the tomb, prays to the Father, and calls, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus comes out, still dressed in his burial suit. Jesus raises Lazarus not to make everyone feel better, but to show the kind of death Jesus will suffer, and thus to cultivate belief. The raising of Lazarus is a sacrament of the raising of Jesus, and the raising of Jesus is a sacrament of the raising of all who believe.

When the time drew near for Richard Plater to die, he received his last communion. Actually he received two last communions. At the first, he was unable to swallow, and so he received what

the church teaches is “spiritual communion,” giving spiritual benefits even though the food cannot be eaten. The next day he rallied and was able to eat the holy bread, and he was anointed on the forehead with oil of the sick. On both occasions family members and others standing around received communion with him. We call this last communion *viaticum*, or “food for a journey,” for death is a journey across a great body of water to a distant shore where all those we have loved, and all the blessed ones, and Jesus await us. Nourished by the bread of heaven, prepared for the third great mystery of life, Richard Plater crosses that water and approaches that shore. There stand his mother Anna and father Richard, his sister Louise, his wives Eleanore and Pamela, his cousins and ancestors, and a great crowd of friends who have gone before. And as he steps ashore, Jesus takes him in his arms.

Ormonde Plater