THE LAST ENEMY

By JOHN HARRIOTT

IT IS OVER a hundred years since we entered the age of the photograph. How it brings home the fact of death! Here is an ambulance-driver in the Crimea, bearded, huddled in his greatcoat, his cap awry, peering out resentfully at the strange new machine whose products he may never have seen. Despite his experience of life, so different from ours, and the sights he saw which have passed away, he is plainly one of us, and it seems for a moment possible to reach through the page and shake his hand. But he is dead. Here is a troopship, soldiers crowding the decks, singing lustily as it moves out into Southampton Water. All dead. Here is the Court of the Tsar, there a tennis party on the lawn of an english vicarage, and there a class of ragged children in a north-country town, and there a jam of carriages and drays in Piccadilly, and there a milling crowd of straw-hatted young men and long-skirted girls celebrating the Relief of Mafeking. Dead, all of them dead. No painted portrait brings home, as does the photograph, the fleshly reality of people in the past, who lived like us and are dead.

It is the scale of death which overwhelms almost as much as death itself. There are four billion people alive today, and all will die. Daily they pour through the gates of death, thousands upon thousands and millions upon millions. And yet, as we know, each death is negotiated and suffered as a particular death, and each sends out a few quiet ripples among relatives and friends before the dust of oblivion settles over it. On the one side, death is as common as salt, and there could be a kind of comfort in such a commonplace. On the other, no death is like my death, and however each of us may try to gull himself like a soldier on the battlefield, that he at least will slip past death unnoticed, all know that they must square up to it. Sometimes death strikes like lightning. Sometimes, death moves inexorably towards us, picking off every friend and acquaintance, and infiltrating each of the senses, before the final assault. The certainty of death, and its particularity, have been the preacher's stock in trade since man began. Not less so since the advent of christianity. *Nous mourons tous, et nous mourons tous les jours*, in Bossuet's sombre words. Life is so short. Death is certain. Let us use these

years of dying to make a good death.

Make a good death. Once it seemed so simple. The christian formula was so clear: keep the commandments, observe the Church's laws, pray daily, be faithful to the sacraments, and death would hold no fears. At the end the priest would come, absolve and anoint the dying in the bosom of his family, and after receiving the body of the Lord as food for his journey, the christian would quietly, and almost triumphantly, breathe his last. No terror there. In the words of the indian writer: 'Death was the extinguishing of a lamp, because the dawn had come'. Or as the Mass for the Dead has it, 'Life is changed, not taken away'. If christian mourners mourned, they did so for themselves, not for the departed, entered at last into the light and bliss he was born for.

It is a pleasant picture, and there are deaths which almost uncannily follow that prescription. But I think it true to say that more and more christians find that the classic prescription neither meets the problems of death which they confront, nor the realities of modern life as it is lived. Some of these problems are not peculiar to christians. They are implicit in the paradoxes of death itself. The fact of death can be a spur: time is short, so that activity, experience, achievement, must be hurriedly packed in. At the same time death seems to make a nonsense of all endeavour and all achievement, as it wipes out love, suffering, art, thought, constructions and relationships, leaving only a scatter of artefacts and a handful of tales as a heritage to succeeding generations. Again, death seems a natural process in the sense that all things die, man among them; yet there is a strong natural instinct to fight off death, delay it as long as possible, avoid it if we can. We wish to go gently into that good night, yet rage against the dying of the light. Thus the doctor, in the forefront of a whole industry which wrestles tirelessly with death, feels cheated when his efforts fail. Similarly, society protects its citizens with a thick hedge of laws to reduce the danger of death, and feels outraged when a moment's thoughtlessness or bad luck causes – as we think – unnecessary death. Almost all humdrum activity – labouring, shopping, cooking, eating, resting, cleaning, recreating – is part of an endless war against death. Health farms, cosmetics, slimming and dieting, are attempts to cheat or camouflage the signs and effects of mortality. Men know they will die, yet live as if they will not. They know they will die, yet keep the thought of death stubbornly at bay. They know they will die yet live in hope of discovering a last-minute antidote to death.

That is not the end of the paradoxes. In the here and now anything seems more real than death; at the moment of dying death seems more real than anything. Death is the shadow falling upon every human activity; and yet, as Jung observed, it is also the condiment that adds piquancy to every human activity. The element of risk, the spice of danger, is stirred into every human activity. Just as the mountaineer would find no satisfaction in his sport if he did not know he was pitting himself against death, so every act of faith, love, hope, every decision, every adventure, throughout the course of life is charged with excitement because the certainty of death attends it. 'I shall not pass this way again'. No, and at any moment the way may be closed for good. Terrible though it is to think of death rendering human achievements null and void, without it every achievement in life would be tasteless.

Christians are not immune from these tensions. Indeed they may be even more susceptible. To the fear of death and the pain of dying, they may add fear of everlasting hell. To the gamble implicit in every human act, they add the gamble on salvation, hope of reward and fear of punishments beyond imagining. Every decision is fraught with consequence not simply in the framework of this short life, but in the framework of eternity. If the unbeliever has reason to rail against a life on earth which seems as short as a blast on a whistle, in which so much seems possible and so little can be achieved, the believer may rail against being asked to stake so much on heaven, before he has time even to settle down and feel at home on earth.

However that may be, under the old dispensation the christian seemed to derive little comfort from his hope of paradise, at least judging from his outward behaviour. Despite all the talk of entering a better life, and all the consoling rhetoric, the average mourners at an average catholic funeral exhibited the same inconsolable grief as their pagan neighbours. There was a sense of doom, as if it must be presumed that only a lucky few would edge into heaven, and the dear departed unlikely to be among them.

The truth is that for many christians their beliefs did not help them to face death; indeed, they not infrequently added to their anxiety. It could not be assumed that christians would die serenely and confidently, unbelievers in an agony of despair. The unbeliever might die peacefully, sufficiently convinced that he had had his moment, that he was falling asleep for the last time, and that all further consciousness would now cease. The christian might equally well die in a state bordering on panic, overwhelmed by a sense of

guilt and fear of damnation. Those powerful mission and retreat sermons, whose spirit was so marvellously caught in James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, evoking unbearable physical torments for ever and ever, could enter the bloodstream, and it was not everyone who managed to overcome them with a truer sense of divine mercy. It is not difficult to see why. The rhetoric of mercy and eternal blessedness, the descriptions of paradise, were altogether more pallid and more speculative than the heightened descriptions of pains whose earthly reality was already all too familiar. It was, and is, easier to describe a convincing hell than a convincing heaven. Similarly, large numbers of people find it easier to believe in their sins and frailties than their virtues, and a theology which spoke of salvation as the reward for keeping a bargan ('If you keep out of mortal sin, I will save you') could quickly undermine hope in people painfully conscious of their sinfulness. So, the rhetoric went one way – the certainty of life after death, the joys of paradise awaiting the faithful christian – and the individual's feeling another. Far from rejoicing in the thought of being united with his risen Lord, many a christian was as depressed by the physical signs of ageing, and the thought of approaching death, and as eager as any unbeliever, to put off the moment of death.

To this traditional predicament, changes in our modern mentality and way of life have added further difficulties which many christians experience. For better or worse, when members of the Church could look up a detailed catalogue of sins with all their divisions and sub-divisions, at least they knew where they stood. Today there is a greater sense of moral ambiguity, greater emphasis on individual assessment of right and wrong, individual decision and individual responsibility. There is less stress on pre-packed right answers, more on ways of reaching a right answer and developing greater moral sensibility within the christian community. This is to my mind a step in the right direction, but it leaves in tatters the old account-book system which brought assurance to many that they were 'right with God'. Positively, it can create a more christian sense of salvation as God's free gift, a deeper and more loving and more trustful relationship with the redeeming Christ; negatively, it may sometimes lead to an ennervating state of free-floating anxiety, heightened by the approach of death.

This particular revolution in the christian approach to morality has been sparked by discontent with the gap between theory and experience. The old system simply did not ring true. But another

reason for rejecting chessboard morality is the destructive, inhibiting effect it had on so many christians of a nervous disposition. Far too many reduced the christian life to keeping out of hot water. In order to do nothing wrong, they did nothing at all. They virtually sailed from cradle to grave with hatches battened down, lying on their bunks, while the boat sailed on automatic pilot. There was no place for risk, decision or enterprise. They believed like the character in the gospel that the Lord was a hard master, and the safest thing was to bury their talent so that it could be produced for inspection on his return. Against this desolating interpretation there has also been a strong reaction. Life has to be lived positively, risks must be taken, there is room for doubt and failure, for these are not the end of the world. Holding God in awe is right and proper, but not in the sense that it stifles human capacities, renders life sterile, and breeds a paralysing caution.

A third reaction is against the view that because the fulfilment of life lies beyond the grave, this world is of no account. Growing christian involvement in political, social and economic matters, derives from the theological understanding that the building of the kingdom starts here. The prospect of heaven, the inadequacies of human justice and human endeavour, do not justify opting out of earthly concerns and pursuing a totally private, individualistic cultivation of the soul. Equally, increased understanding of salvation as effected for and in and through the christian community – 'Look not on my sins but the faith of your Church' – steers the contemporary christian in the same direction. The kingdom is among us, and we must play our part within it here and now. Keeping the thought of heaven in mind is one thing; but for the christian to fix his eyes on the sunlit uplands that lie ahead, while ignoring the afflictions and distress all about him, is quite another. If the christian is truly to adore 'in Him, and with Him, and through Him', it must be in and with and through the people who are Christ's Body.

At least two other shifts in sensibility are worth remarking. First, a disinclination to take seriously the more picturesque and bloodthirsty descriptions of hellfire. This on two counts: one, that God cannot be more ruthless than his creatures, few of whom would wish to condemn even the worst of their fellows to everlasting torment; secondly, the – literal – pains Christ has gone to in order to bring home the loving, merciful and forgiving nature of his Father, far transcending the mercy and forgiveness shown by men. Though it is true that judged from the outside the deliberate malice and

cruelty of human beings can be appalling (think only of the concentration camps), in normal human judgment there is a gross disproportion between the muddled confusion of conventional sin, and the rhadamanthine judgment passed on it by the wrathful God of hellfire preachers. It is possible to believe that in theory a person may grow such a carapace of selfishness and self-absorption that not even the love of God can touch his heart, but very difficult to believe that it happens often. The assumption must be that if there is a real choice at the moment of death between God and self, not the rather artificial choice in everyday life between a God glimpsed through a glass darkly and some object or advantage which may or may not be good but is most certainly there, the choice will fall on God. And nothing short of a real choice seems to square with God's justice.

Finally, the romantic picture of christian death is badly blotched by the conventions of modern society, at least in urban, industrialized countries. We no longer live in villages or close-knit parishes where relatives and friends gather spontaneously round those who are sick unto death. People die in hospitals, or suddenly in accidents, or alone in their bed-sitters. Outside religious houses, only a lucky few are likely to die supported and comforted with their family praying at the bedside. It can and does happen, and such a classical christian death is very moving. Only a few weeks ago I was one of a small gathering round the bedside of a priest uncle who was dying. It was a Sunday morning, with sunshine flooding the room. Mass had just finished, sung to music he himself had composed. As we said the prayers for the dying and recited the rosary – he died during the mystery of the resurrection – I was never more conscious of the need and the power of prayer; it seemed palpably to lift him through the final pains of dying and over the frontier of death. And from the moment of his death all of us were filled with a sense of exhilaration – the word is not too strong – which continued to fill the house. It was a perfect end to a marvellously rich life. But such occasions are rare, and the 'unprovided death' against which the Church bids us pray is, for most people, far more likely. For great numbers of people death comes at the end of a long purgatorial wait of years spent alone or among strangers; and though there may be priest and sacraments when the time comes, there is no provision of prayers and familiar presences to share the burden of dying.

So much for the problems. What can be done? Clearly there is a need to distinguish carefully between the christian community's task

of assisting its members to face and adjust to the experience of death, and its communication of belief in the resurrected life promised to his followers by Christ and guaranteed by his own rising from the dead. The two have frequently been confused in christian preaching and in the minds of believers. But as I have already suggested, belief in the life to come does not necessarily make the business of dying easier, and those who do not believe may die contentedly. It is not belief in the resurrected life as such, but the whole context of our life of faith and our understanding of the bond between God and man, which affects the christian's attitude to death. In short, the Church's task is far wider than simply preaching the certainty of everlasting life. Making a good death is the end of a long process of psychological adjustment, and there is a great deal in christian experience and teaching which can help that process.

Adjusting to death. Believer and unbeliever alike have to face the fact of death, and come to terms with their sense of revulsion. It is everyman's experience. 'I will die. When, where, how? I do not wish to die. I fear to die'. However deliberately that knowledge is pushed to the back of the mind, however determinedly a person concentrates on whatever seems to put back the prospect of death and make the present golden – sex, art, work, or to create an illusion of permanence – a comfortable home, financial security, the best possible medical care, and so forth – always the certainty of death is drumming quietly away like the engines in the bowels of a ship. To live with that certainty is the greatest demand made upon man. Some react by throwing themselves into a life of feverish self-indulgence – 'Gather your roses while ye may'. Others sink into a state of apathy – 'Why bother?' Others escape into various kinds of illusion, familiar to the psychiatrist. Neurosis and schizophrenia are both, at bottom, ways of repressing the certainty of death.

The christian community's purpose must be to help people live positively and realistically between the poles of panic and apathy. That means stressing the value of all human activities as well as the dignity and value of every individual regardless of the accidentals – power, wealth, status etc. – by which society judges a life to be 'successful'. It means bringing out in a way that carries conviction the lovableness of all human beings in the eyes of God. It means rooting in the benignity of God, revealed through Christ, the fact that the universe is ultimately friendly. And it means enabling people, through experiencing acceptance within the christian community, to realize that their imperfect best is 'good enough', even if

it falls short of their own and the community's ideals. The christian dies most easily who has grown into a true conviction that God loves and loves him, and in the healing presence of that love has accepted himself truthfully with all his strengths and his structural weaknesses, all his failings and follies, all his genuine achievements, however minor. And that conviction, it need hardly be said, normally grows through the loving sympathy and acceptance of other human beings, mediating the divine love which informs all human love. To die without regrets, truthfully, without illusions about one's vices and virtues, accepting and accepted: this is the ideal. And it comes out of a deepening understanding and broadening vision of God's dealings with us, once again mediated through the christian community as it has actually been experienced, rather than pious romantic notions about death, or even intellectual adherence to the doctrine of the resurrection. Death will normally be of a piece with life, and those come to terms with death who have gradually come to terms with life. If a person's understanding of what is expected of a christian during life is wrong, then his understanding of what is expected at death will be wrong also. If a person embarks upon death filled with romantic pictures of ethereal saints filled with virtues and graces, looking back on an unblemished life, and triumphantly assured of entering paradise on merit, something has gone seriously wrong in their previous comprehension of their faith. Christian life and teaching should strip away illusions, not add to them.

Christian teaching on detachment and self-sacrifice plainly helps towards making a good death. Those especially who have lived heartily, revelled in the joys and riches earth has to offer, and been fortunate in those they have loved and been loved by, will find it hard to leave behind all that is so dear. To break with a beloved home, wife, children, satisfying work, a whole range of pleasures and satisfactions to pass into the unknown: that is very hard. Again the knack cannot be acquired at a stroke. The balancing trick which enables us to live enthusiastically in the present, love deeply and create with conviction, while at the same time recognizing that everything is contingent and provisional, is not acquired in a day. The secret is to love without wishing to possess, to relish what other human beings and the earth itself offer us as gifts, without becoming dependent on them or feeding ravenously on them to support our self-esteem. A habit of penance and self-sacrifice which allows self to develop through the service of others keeps the raging Ego in

check, cultivates a good-humoured acceptance of our own limitations, and enables us to value all creatures while keeping everything in proportion. When we have learned to give up gracefully the small, dear things of life, there is a good chance that we will gracefully surrender life itself. There are, heaven knows, opportunities enough in the course of living. 'Each time we part I die a little', as the old song says. Every parting is a training exercise for death, a little death, whether it is parting with a comfortable old sweater, a house that has grown fond and familiar, a job in which one has been happy, or a beloved wife or husband.

The other key to making a good death is, I believe, a steady growth in honesty with oneself accompanied by deepening appreciation of God's loving nature. The two go together. The humbug we practise on ourselves can so often be traced to a hidden fear that we serve a severe God who must at all costs be placated. The temptation then is to draw down blinds on the shoddier elements in our personality, camouflage or excuse what is mean and vicious, the waste and the failures, to trick ourselves and, so we may hope, God himself. But God cannot be tricked, and neither can we. Only when we have learned complete confidence in God's unfailing love, and total acceptance of every human being, warts and all, are we likely to face ourselves with ruthless honesty and accept tranquilly the dark side of our own nature. And the Cross is the window through which we come finally to understand the quality of divine love, and through which we find the strength to face the truth about ourselves without panic or despair. Only then, too, that we cease to bargain with God and know in our hearts that salvation is truly a gift offered to all willing to receive it.

Once again I return to the christian community as a school for dying well. It is there that it should be possible to experience the freedom to be honest, and a love without qualifications or conditions: love neither sentimental nor sickly, but robust and sympathetic, love that supports and accepts people as they are. If the community acts as a public prosecutor, judge and jury, the God its members come to know will be a caricature. Likewise if it demands service, revels in its power, belittles the individual, scorns where it is asked only to forgive. If it acts so, it will add its own stings to the pain of death, and death will truly be the last enemy. But if through it, the true God has been glimpsed, however darkly, death will hold no fears but be welcomed as a friend.

I have said nothing, deliberately, about belief in life after death

and its bearing upon the christian's attitude to death. Plainly, those who believe that death is a terminus, and those who truly believe it to be a gateway opening onto a further stage of existence will approach death very differently; to quote Hopkins, 'God, lover of souls, swaying considerate scales, complete thy creature dear O where it fails'. The belief that God offers man eternal blessedness, and that Christ has opened the way to it, is of course the mainspring of christian life. The christian community's task is to proclaim that belief and the evidence for it, and to create conditions in which the individual can steadily grow more confident of it. All I would say is that often enough popular preaching is an obstacle to this process by which the individual makes the common belief his own. Perhaps detailed descriptions of the joys of heaven are less common than they used to be, but still they occur; and very disgreeable they usually are. An endless hippie rally on the Isle of Wight is not everyone's dream of paradise, nor a kind of football chant, even addressed to the Almighty, lasting for all eternity. Even talk of banquets and wedding feasts does not enthuse every breast. Better perhaps to talk strictly in pauline terms of continuity between the personality here below, like the seed in the ground, and its ultimate fulfilment, like the tree or the flower which eventually appears above ground; or the pleasures of this world as a foretaste of that which eye hath not seen nor ear heard that God has prepared for those who love him. If christians show few signs of eagerly running to paradise, it may be because the paradise they hear described is not a place to which any reasonable person would wish to go.

I remember finally a man who had come to terms with death, learned confidence in a loving God, and believed in and looked forward to paradise. He was an old french jesuit. When his last moments had come, a few scholastics were asked to pray by his bedside. As they stood there, suitably grave and recollected, the old man opened one eye and said in a weak voice, 'Open the drawer at the foot of that cupboard'. One of them did so and found a bottle of champagne and some glasses. 'Fill up your glasses' the old man said. One of the scholastics did as he was told and they stood for a moment wondering what to say next. The old man opened up the other eye and said rather gruffly, 'What about me?' So they gave him a glass. Then he said, 'I've lived a very happy life. I'd like you to drink with me to a happy death'. They drank the toast, and five minutes later he died. A good death: but then he had spent his life learning to love his enemies.