

# **‘WE SHALL BE CHANGED’**

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*In memoriam*

George Anthony Gillespie 29 October 1922–21 March 2000

Florence Doreen Gillespie 2 July 1924–12 April 2000

WHEN I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE AT OXFORD IN THE 1970s, the preaching of Austin Farrer still had a high reputation. One of Farrer’s published sermons has stuck in my mind to this day. He described, as I recall, travelling on the London Underground, and noticing among the advertisements that line the escalators a glossy photograph of women’s corsetry carrying the slogan: ‘for uplift, for comfort, for general support’. ‘Isn’t this’, said Farrer, ‘rather like the Church of England: for uplift, for comfort, for general support?’

When both my parents died within three weeks of each other,<sup>1</sup> I felt in need of some of that spiritual corsetry, that uplift, comfort and general support. But it was not solid, coherent support that came to me. I noticed, instead, that my subconscious—as is often the case when the conscious mind is occupied with practical things—had taken to sorting through the debris of ideas, images, quotations, and clichés that clutter up my memory. Certain key phrases and images started coming to the surface over and over again. I was reminded of Eliot’s line: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’.

Two key images emerged as the nuclei around which my thinking gradually coalesced. Both are commonplaces in Christian thought—clichés in the literature of bereavement. But thinking through the shape and trajectory of these images helped me understand more clearly why they were such commonplaces, and how they have become so dominant in the repertoire of Christian consolation.

<sup>1</sup> This piece was originally preached as a Sermon before the University of Oxford on 21 May 2000.

The first image comes in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15:

Lo, I tell you a mystery! We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

The second also comes from St Paul, this time his letter to the Philippians:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even to the death of the cross. Therefore God has also highly exalted him and given him a name which is above all names. (Philippians 2:5-11)

### ***The Twinkling Trumpet***

These quotations worked on my imagination in interlocking ways. The beautiful invocation of changed and transfigured bodies in the first passage, with its emphasis on the easiness of the transformation ('in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye') is, of course, the New Testament reading for the funeral service in the *Book of Common Prayer*. But the apparent ease of that transformation is what often strikes me as difficult about it. Few people who have watched a loved one die can describe the process as easy or happening 'in the twinkling of an eye', however peaceful the final stages may be. Letting go of the world is hard work.

Paul is here juxtaposing two images with quite different suggestions: the twinkling of an eye, and the last trumpet. What he is doing here is, I think, close to what we find in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. Unable to adjudicate between the different mythologies of the death of Arthur circulating in mid-15th century England, Malory refuses to place his authority behind any of them and merely says, portentously but opaquely, that 'in this world he changed his life'. Life is changed, not ended. The last trumpet is in fact more of a wake-up call to the changed souls who are now raised imperishable than a last post sounded over the dead. The theology of the passage is clear enough: the

dead are acted upon by the power of God; the change happens to them, they *are* raised. Paul's comments echo Isaiah's, 'He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces', and are later echoed themselves in the Book of Revelation:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.<sup>2</sup>

And this is a change once and for all: the final escape from time and causality, from change and decay. The changed soul is now imperishable and impassible.

Milton uses a very similar rhetorical trick at the end of his *Lycidas*. Drawing on both classical and Christian imagery, Milton imagines his hero in a place where the saints will 'wipe the tears forever from his eyes'. Some of his lines have perfect balance and symmetry:

Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor  
So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed.

But then the rhythm begins to quicken:

And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled ore,  
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.

'In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye', Milton has been able to enforce a change of tone for his poem from notes of grief to those of joy, not least by the burst of energy he loads into the verb 'flames' at the beginning of that line. That word explodes into a roar of kinetic force that powers the rest of the poem:

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high  
Through the dear might of him that walked the waves.

And yet—it all seems a bit neat, almost glib. The paradox of death neatly swallowed up in victory is hard to take at face value, or to sustain for very long with any satisfaction. It can feel like a triumph of hope

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 21:4.

over experience, and a very temporary triumph at that. 'Behold I make all things new!' can feel like 'With one bound he was free'.

### ***Christ's Self-Emptying***

Milton's replaying of this image also positions him close to my second strong image, the great song in Philippians which Christian tradition has interpreted in terms of the self-emptying love of Christ, and which has as its basic shape an inverted parabola of descent to death and ascent to exaltation. And it is when we look at this passage that some of the apparent glibness, or at least over-simplification, in the first passage comes into wider focus. As in the passage from 1 Corinthians, where it is God who changes and raises those who sleep, so here it is God who exalts the humbled Jesus with the name above all names. But Philippians, unlike 1 Corinthians, sets the paradox within a whole chain of actions culminating in the central paradox of self-emptying and exaltation, of humiliation and reward.

Even the syntax of the Philippians passage reflects how Christ's exaltation is causally *dependent* on his death, and in particular on its shamefulness. In the first place, we have Christ not grasping his undoubted equality with God, but humbling himself, emptying himself even, to take the form of a servant. In not grasping at his changelessly divine equality, Christ open-handedly identifies himself with those exposed to the buffeting of time, change and suffering in a fallen world. He becomes open to and subject to change. 'Change and decay in all around I see', says a familiar hymn, 'help of the helpless, O abide with me'. Christ abides with and sides with the helpless through the incarnation by releasing his grip on divinity. And his state of mind in doing this—his self-emptying, unconditional love, obedience and humility—is a model of what all Christians should strive to find in themselves as they try to deal with that changing and fallen world. Paul dramatizes succinctly how Christ helps the helpless: by becoming in some sense helpless himself under absolute obedience to the divine will; by becoming a suffering servant whose service leads to perfect freedom. The tears that will be wiped dry after death are the 'tears of things', what Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*. They are nothing more than the human condition, 'mourning and weeping in this vale of tears'.

The shape of falling and rising appeals, I suppose, because it is the archetypal and mythical shape of the route map to Christian salvation,

deeply etched into the restlessness of our subconscious minds. It is a plot trajectory that surprisingly mixes elements of tragedy and comedy. The human tragedy of the Fall and Calvary leads unexpectedly to the divine comedy of the transfigured Christ: a *felix culpa* indeed. It points to the paradox of enduring change, and to the need for actively engaging with change in this life, before we can hope to be changed finally and irrevocably in the twinkling moment of the last trump.

At a time of grief, however, it was just one tangent of the arc of that passage that caught my attention: he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. The Greeks called this *kenosis*: self-emptying, a kind of willed will-lessness, a sort of emphatic will not to have a separate will but to discover and co-operate in the will of God, a technique of resistance against the world of change and decay enabling weakness to become strength.

But this self-emptying is perhaps also particularly close to the process one observes in those who are dying: a death to the self, as well as a death to the world; a slow and not always unproblematic or easy surrender of the will to the greater strength of illness, of death and of whatever lies behind. What led me to this link was watching my father take communion from hospital chaplains in the final days of his life. Before receiving the host, he would say, slowly, deliberately and fighting against increasing shortness of breath: 'Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed' (Matthew 8:8). What kind of faith could pray for healing in such a situation? What kind of healing could flow from such a prayer? What kind of humility, spiritual openness and obedience could lead to such hopeful confidence?

The prayer derives, of course, from the words of the centurion who asks Jesus for long-distance healing of his valued servant. Jesus says he is willing to come in person and heal him, and the centurion replies (in Matthew's version): 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed'. The centurion is amazed at the humility of Jesus in his willingness to come in person, to show solidarity with another suffering servant. So the healing that comes from the use of that prayer arises partly from the recognition of Jesus as a fellow sufferer, 'in human likeness . . . human form', who shares in our griefs, sufferings and fears, and joins with us in the broken Eucharist of death.

*Kenosis*, self-emptying, openness to change, is, like dying itself, very hard work. It is not the work of a moment, certainly not achieved in

the twinkling of an eye. Rather it is the work of a lifetime, and a life's work that is hard, full of doubt, and challenging. Even Jesus had his Garden of Gethsemane when the awfulness of what awaited him the next day flooded in and almost swamped the kenotic void of his spirit: 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'. Surely few can face death without similar thoughts passing through their mind.

However, humility and obedience are much more muscular virtues than they might appear. They are also, again paradoxically, active and energetic. 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild' is a long way from the self-emptying hero of Philippians. And the heroism of Christ at Gethsemane in submitting his will to the will of God—'yet, not what I want, but what you want'—is a heroic gesture we glibly and unthinkingly repeat every time we say in the Lord's prayer: 'Thy will be done'. Allowing the will of God to work in our will is never easy or comfortable. As a recent advertisement said (not one for women's underwear): 'Don't you just love being in control'. We never are in control in this world: change is. But giving up the illusion of control is never easily accomplished, perhaps especially at the end of life.

### ***Julian of Norwich and the Annunciation***

Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century English mystic, realised this when she used the image of the Annunciation to express her own sudden realisation—'conception' is the word she uses—of God's grace working inside her, leading her to seek for him more deeply. The image of Mary sitting in her room and meekly responding to the Angel's message has become in our minds deeply feminised, and softened almost out of existence. But in the middle ages it was an image of real force and power, which spoke to men and women with equal ferocity and suddenness. 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word.'

Imagine the shock of what was being asked of Mary, the magnitude of the changes it introduced into her life, and the obedient humility with which she responded to it: the room of the Annunciation was Mary's Garden of Gethsemane. It is no accident that the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March was observed in the early Middle Ages as the calendar anniversary of the date of the Crucifixion. The link between the two celebrations brings out the parallels between them. Both the



Crucifixion and the Annunciation are responses to divine command. Mary and Christ both humble themselves; both refuse to act contrary to the Lord's word; both pay a great price for their obedience. Mary in her inner room and Christ in Gethsemane both face the challenge of obedient humility and rise to it. Both express and embrace a self-emptying love. No wonder Julian could write of Christ as our Mother: both take on themselves the roles of servants who suffer and are obedient in their co-operation with the will of God. Mary is a human anticipation of Christ's gesture, which then becomes a model for all men and women to admire and emulate. Her selfless love and obedient humility is rewarded by the exaltation that calls her Queen of Heaven and Star of the Sea. But we often lose sight of the toughness and heroic will that are implied by her actions at the Annunciation, as well as in accepting her sword of sorrow at the foot of the Cross. There was nothing easy or tranquil about her route to exaltation. That is why the medieval church saw her as a figure that Christians could identify with in their own sorrows and uncertainties.

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The Annunciation, therefore, joins my repertoire of key images that illuminate and comment on each other. No wonder the Catholic tradition asks Mary to 'pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death', for it is perhaps in death that most of us come face to face most starkly with the reality of what kenotic self-emptying is really all about. Letting go of the world is hard to do; discerning and co-operating with the will of God is tough work. Moreover, just as that paradoxical trajectory of humility leading to exaltation links Mary at the Annunciation with Christ at Gethsemane, so its shape is more covertly encoded by Scripture in other, less visible, ways.

Take the Beatitudes, for example. At face value they represent tightly packed verbal paradoxes, and trite inversions of human logic: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs'; 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. In fact, however, they express gnominically the humility and exaltation depicted more vividly in the passages we have already looked at. Poverty of spirit and purity of heart are attributes of the human will that has actively sought to discover and facilitate the will of God. These prayers promise not redress for social or political disadvantage, but rather a clear sight of Heaven, when, faces wiped dry of tears, we shall be changed utterly and will hear the Lord saying 'Behold I make all things new'. But even these

formulations can sound glib and contractual. We need strong images to help us realise how hard it is to make the Passover from tears to joy. It is the work of a lifetime to journey towards the twinkling of the eye. And not everyone's life's work is a masterpiece. For many of us, our time in the Garden of Gethsemane is lengthy and anxious: 'my soul is very sorrowful even unto death'.

Perhaps the most remarkable dramatization is the one explored at length by Julian of Norwich in her meditation on the dying Christ. She sees him hanging on the cross, apparently moments from death. Remarkable because it pulls together both the key passages I have talked about here and synthesizes the imagery in a way that shows astonishing powers of control over the resonances of words and images. I don't think there can be much doubt that Julian had seen people die, and I don't think there can be much doubt that any one who has sat at a deathbed will identify with the way she describes time passing with aching slowness towards a conclusion that is both dreaded and, paradoxically, longed for; the way that objects looked at with the intensity of grief start to become disembodied and distorted over time; the way that the face of a dying person changes subtly and slowly over the days and hours before death; the changing colours of a face close to death, and after death. All this is reported and visualised by Julian with honesty and power in her account of Christ's last hours:

This long pining seemed to me as if he had been dead for seven nights, but still dying, at the point of passing away, suffering the last pain.<sup>3</sup>

There is nothing discreet or sanitised about her account of Christ's dying. Christ's death is brutal, slow and anguished. It is at once as if he has been seven nights dead and also 'continually dying'. The event seems to be both already completed and apparently endless, a kind of waking nightmare.

Julian sees the final agony of Christ as a moment poised between life and death, a moment of awful stillness and silence in which the shared fact of common mortality can interlock with, and be illuminated by, the fact of Christ's divinity and exaltation.

<sup>3</sup> Julian of Norwich, *A Showing of Divine Love*, chapter 16 (all translations my own, based on what is usually called the Long Text).





Into this surreally extended moment, she introduces a meditation on Christ's nature that complicates the emotions of the scene by reminding us of that same unconditional love that Paul talks about in Philippians:

And thus I saw our Lord Jesus lingering for a long time. For the oneing of the godhead gave strength to the manhood, to suffer for love more than all men might suffer. . . . For he that was highest and worthiest was the most fully set at nought and the most utterly despised. . . . And in this he brought partly to mind the height and nobility of the glorious Godhead and also the preciousness and the

Soul-bow, draw, press down on the strings  
Stretched out the length of the tree.  
There have I been nailed.

I would never have believed, you my companions on this earth,  
That its diverging paths would here, at this point, convene.  
We were the upright witnesses, holding our heads high, straight  
like rocks.  
We were already on the peaks, and we thirsted for the summits,  
for the steepened slopes  
We could never move far enough upwards:  
We had to open ourselves out,  
Embrace this hard wood.

Love bursts open upright solitude;  
Its hands stretch open, span like wings.  
The crossing of the ways from earth to zenith, from west to east,  
Thrills within these two trees, pulsing through their sap.

tenderness of the blissful body, which are united together, and also the reluctance that there is in our nature to suffer pain.<sup>4</sup>

The power of this moment, for me, comes from the way that Julian blends the human fear and inescapable lived experience of pain, suffering and death with the equally lived hope of the reward that awaits those who are set at nought and despised. Those who are set at nought will, in a mathematical paradox, be oned with God. Julian has really got inside Paul’s image of the self-emptying love of Christ: she has put flesh on its bones. She has earthed the abstractions of *kenosis* in the reality of death.

<sup>4</sup> A *Showing of Divine Love*, chapter 20.

What amazes Julian most of all in reflecting on this harrowing scene is that the dreaded and longed for moment of release never in fact arrives:

And I looked after the departing one with all my strength and expected to have seen the body completely dead, but I saw him not so.

The feared outcome of the death watch never materialises in the form in which it is expected:

And right in the same time that, it seemed to me, by appearances, that the life might no longer last and the showing of the end necessarily had to happen, suddenly, while I was beholding the same cross, he changed his appearance. The changing of his appearance changed mine, and I was as glad and merry as it was possible to be. Then Our Lord brought merrily to my mind the words 'Where is now any point of your pain or your grief?'

*Suddenly*: by a brilliant sleight of hand, Julian has managed to blend together our two key images: the paradox of death on the Cross which leads to exaltation has been woven in to the claim that 'we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye'. Grief and joy become intense mirror images of each other. No longer through a glass darkly, we are changed because we now see Christ differently. We pass from the foot of the Cross to the Easter Garden:

We are now . . . sharing his cross with him in our pains and our passion, dying; and for us, who are willfully abiding in the same cross with his help and his grace up to the last point, suddenly he shall change his appearance to us, and we shall be with him in paradise. Between the one and the other there shall be no time, and then shall all be brought to joy.<sup>5</sup>

Not only is this a spectacular reading of Paul's teachings on death and exaltation; it also, in the phrase 'willful abiding', offers a way of describing that tough, hard-won blend of obedience and humility, which characterizes those who seek to have the mind of Christ within them. By her placing the changing of cheer at the end of a long and

<sup>5</sup> *A Showing of Divine Love*, chapter 21.

tortuous struggle for life and for death, Julian's joy appears in the twinkling of an eye, and with a suddenness that surprises after the languors of the preceding descriptions: 'Where is now any point of your pain or your grief?'

Julian helps us to see how Paul's words reflect both the psychology of grief and bereavement, and the reality of human suffering and death. The nobility of a suffering that aspires to the hope of reward and exaltation is a kind of heroism in the face of change, a heroism driven by the hope of one final, irrevocable change. As Cardinal Newman said: 'to be human is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.' We are all changed and challenged by another's death, and we need clear maps and strong images to help us rediscover and navigate the tracks of our lives. After the shocked and frozen stillness of bereavement, the journey through change must begin again.

Can these thoughts provide any uplift, comfort, and general support? Do they enable us, like the speaker in *Lycidas*, to move on 'to fresh woods and pastures new'?

If only it were that easy . . .

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Tire, archet de mon âme, oh presse sur les cordes / Tendues le long de l'arbre!  
On m'a cloué dessus. / Je n'aurais jamais cru, compagnons de la terre,  
Qu'en ce point convergeaient ses routes dispersées.  
Nous étions les témoins qui nous tenions debout, / Droits comme les rochers.  
Nous cherchions sur ces pics / L'élan vers les sommets, la pente redressée.  
Monter ne peut suffire, il faut s'ouvrir, / Etreindre ce bois dur.  
L'amour fait éclater la solitude droite / Et l'emplit d'envergure jusqu'au bout de ses mains.  
La croisée des chemins, de la terre au zénith, / De l'Ouest jusqu'à l'Orient  
Vibre entre ces deux bois en plein cœur de la sève.