

A sermon on 'Reconciliation' flowing out from a reading of 'Fragment' by Rupert Brooke.

Delivered by the Revd Canon Malcolm Bradshaw Senior Anglican Chaplain, Athens, for the Rupert Brooke Centenary Commemoration at Brooke's grave in Tris Boukes, Skyros, 23 April 2015.

We have just received a poem that is suffuse with foreboding. An earlier exuberance and romance for engaging in war has now taken in realism. Over the next few days – those who were providing Brooke with companionship and entertainment, the very stuff of life, are likely to be no more, their bodies mangled, his included.

Brooke states this as a fact. He makes no moral embellishment, he gives no commentary. He simply captures what he is sensing at that moment, the fact that death is a reality for his comrades and himself - and it is close.

That is perhaps where the poignancy of the poem lies.

And what helps to bring out this poignancy is that sharp contrast of the ethereal, shadowy, ghostly content of the last verse, the realm of death, to what we heard in the second verse - lines that capture strongly the sheer physicality,

sensuousness, vigour, firmness and beauty of life. The words he uses are well hued and can only arise from one who has himself observed, sensed, tasted and known what he calls 'the weight and firmness and linked beauty of bodies, this gay machine of splendor'.

I don't seek to be salacious here. Within each one of us is that most powerful of all elements, desire. It is a huge reservoir of energy which is constantly, and often apart from us, spilling out in multifarious longings. Desire is essential to opening us up to ourselves and to what is in life.

But strangely it never seems to be sated. It is rare that we are fully reconciled with our desire. And desire is there even to the end. So what is the goal of the desire?

We might see Brooke's short life as being a laboratory of research focused on desire. The Puritanism of his mother acted as a control element. This Puritanism was part of him and expressed itself as in his moments of self doubt and the advice he gave to others – particularly women! Yet, it was also the catalysis for his own personal rebellion. Gifted

with looks and intelligence, graced with charm, athletic, of a social standing, charismatic and attractive, yet self absorbed, self obsessed and opinionated, he ventured to follow his inclinations more than many would dare. Such plummeting of desire reveals the complexity of his personality (acting, maybe as sign to all as to how truly complex each one of us is). One can't but think that it was this very life style that helped furnished his poetry with the colour, the imagery, the feeling, the sensitivity, the awareness that it possesses whether it be focused on places, relationships, moods or situations. Nevertheless, it

was a life style that created casualties, he himself included, torn apart emotionally and mentally, taken over by a nervous breakdown. To say that Brooke knew reconciliation in himself seems to be a misnomer.

Desire - the desire active in a person, in a community, in a nation. What is it and how might it be handled? Do we stand with Brooke's mother, suspicious of desire's strength incarcerating its power and directing its force by imposing a strong moral code sustained by a fearful understanding of a judgmental God. This

had consequences. Was she any more reconciled with herself and with life than was her son?

What if, in contrast, we see desire as containing the very presence and creativity of God's activity within us - a presence leading us and opening us into a fullness of communion with God himself and takes in all that exists – a communion which is rich in creativity, life, beauty and appreciation. Paul is suggestive of this in chapter eight of his letter to the Romans. There he writes , 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until

now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. He adds,' We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words'. Is that what the desire we find within ourselves, within communities, within nations all about? Perhaps the theologian and spiritual writer Augustine of Hippo most succinctly expresses this in his words, 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in you'.

I have been asked to speak on reconciliation. This I have done focusing on desire, a most potent force within us seemingly possessing an independence apart from us and has to be reckoned with.

Mishandled it results in bitterness, ugliness, destructiveness, even the atrocity of war.

Yet within its sighs too deep for words there is the path to a harmony, a reconciliation, a richness of living, a communion of which poets sense and hold in our vision – a communion which is inclusive of but far greater than the love of others, the love of nature, the love of nation; a communion of reconciliation which is met,

embodied, in the life of one whose cross is laid upon this grave of Rupert Brooke's. What if Brooke has been awoken to God being present in his desire rather than to a God fearful in judgement?

Revd Canon Malcolm Bradshaw
anglican@otenet.gr
Tel No (0030) 210 721 4906