



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

26 July 2020: Sunday Worship

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Romans 8:26–39, Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

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‘In the end not horror, but glory’

Our world is a deep puzzle. It contains both marvellous beauty and dreadful horror, exhilarating vitality and debilitating disease, warm love and cold hatred, great good and great evil. Stranded in the middle, what are we to make of it? The Christian answer is the one given by St Paul at the end of this morning’s reading from his Epistle to the Romans: “I am convinced that neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8.38-9). For Paul, at the end of all things, as at the beginning, stands the love of God. Therefore, in the end it is the glory that will triumph, not the horror.

The most riveting, dramatic explanation of this Pauline, Christian faith that I know of comes in the form of a film released just over twenty years ago: Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*. This tells a story about the struggle of American troops to wrest the Pacific island of Guadalcanal from the Japanese in 1942. But it’s not a conventional war story at all, because its main interest is in using the experience of war to raise the deep existential question, What’s at the bottom of it all, horror or glory?

At the film’s centre is an ongoing debate between two characters, Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt. Welsh responds to the horror of war around him by trying to harden himself with cynicism. “In this world”, he tells Witt, “a man is nothing. And there ain’t no world but this one.... We’re living in a world that is blowing itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it. In a situation like this, all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothing touch him –look out for himself”.

But Witt resists this option. He is captivated by the memory of the serenity with which his mother faced her own death—a serenity in which he believes he’s seen “the key to immortality”; and he refuses to permit the arbitrary horrors of war to eclipse the equal fact of profound beauty

in the world—the beauty of the natural world, of good people, and of happy social life. “You’re wrong”, he says to Welsh. “I’ve seen another world”.

But this is really only the surface of his answer; indeed, on most occasions Witt meets Welsh’s cynical questions with silence. The real substance of his response is practical, rather than verbal. His real answer is his refusal to harden himself, his Christ-like persistence in caring for those around him, in gazing with compassion upon the agonised faces of comrades dying in his arms, in letting himself feel the pain, in remaining vulnerable.

In the end, Witt himself is killed as he deliberately draws the enemy away from a wounded soldier—“Greater love hath no man”—and Welsh, later crouching at his graveside, asks, “Where’s your spark now?”—that is: “What does the hope that enlightened you add up to *now*?”

But everything hangs on the tone here. Is it the mocking voice of triumphant cynicism, “Where’s your spark *now*?”; or is it a genuinely open, quizzical, “Where *is* your spark *now*”? To me, it seems clear that it edges toward the latter; partly because Welsh, in spite of the all-too evident cheapness of human life around him, just can’t stop himself caring, and therefore can’t stop himself yearning for something beyond mortality. The last words he speaks in the film, uttered in the privacy of his own soul, are these: “If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eye, and my life will be yours”.

Who’s he speaking to? It can’t be Witt himself, because Witt he certainly has met; it seems to be rather the Source of Witt’s hope, the Original Fire of Witt’s frail, but vital, spark. Sergeant Welsh is praying: “If I never meet you in this life, let me at least feel the lack. A glance from your eye, and my life will be yours”.

One of the reasons that *The Thin Red Line* is such a very persuasive film is that it offers no easy resolution of the ambiguity of things. As Welsh puts it: “One man looks at a dying bird, and thinks there’s nothing but unanswered pain, that death’s got the final word, laughing at him. ‘Nother man sees the same bird, and feels the glory, feels something smiling through it”.

Still, it seems clear to me that the film does venture a statement, implicit but nonetheless definite. Or maybe it would be better to say that the film shows us a sign. The sign that it shows is the face of Witt: vulnerable, compassionate, gentle, but not at all weak, most of all not afraid of death. A shining face. A face of arresting beauty; so beautiful, in fact, that to call it the face of a fool, would

be, I think, an act of sacrilege. But if it's not the face of a fool, and it's not the face of an immortal, then what is it?

It is a sign of what the film repeatedly calls 'glory'. 'Glory' here lies far beyond martial prowess. Indeed, it lies largely beyond the world of time and space altogether. 'Glory' here speaks of that place where human life flourishes free from the secular ravages of war, betrayal, and disease.

This glory does have its moments of presence in this world. *The Thin Red Line* opens on an island in the South Pacific in a village, where children play, adults smile and laugh, and the whole village sings hymns in perfect harmony. (And if you listen carefully, you'll notice that the music that accompanies this scene is Fauré's *In Paradisum*). That is one moment of the presence of 'glory'. A second is Private Bell's reveries of his beautiful young wife, of their love-making, and of her awaiting his return back home—reveries that sustain Bell as he risks his life in battle. And then there's the shining face of Witt himself.

But all of these moments of 'glory' are shown by the film to be vulnerable, ephemeral, mortal: the village is struck down with strife and disease; Bell is stunned by a letter from his wife announcing that she's leaving him for another; and Witt, as I've said, is killed.

So the question arises: are these moments of 'glory' merely illusions masking a basically brutal reality or are they signs of a reality far deeper and more enduring than any of the brutal things that life can throw at us?

There are no certainties here, no proofs one way or the other, and *The Thin Red Line* is wise not to pretend that there are. But it nevertheless gives us a reason to bet on signs rather than illusions. What is this reason? It's the sheer, commanding beauty of the faces of those, like Private Witt, who trust and hope that the fragments of glory in this world—fragments of beauty, fragments of love, fragments of joy—are better clues to the origin and destiny of things than the forces of destruction; and who, because of that trust and hope, are released from self-protective cynicism into self-sending love.