

From England

EVERYWHERE IN CHAINS

by **Daniel O’Leary**

There is a small button on the crematorium lectern. When you press the button at the end of the service, the coffin slides through the curtain into the fire-chute. As I reached for the button, the door at the back of the chapel suddenly swung open and a young handcuffed man stumbled through. He was accompanied by two police officers – a man and a woman. The three of them came slowly, but determinedly, to the front.

The prisoner Ben, allowed out for the occasion, was distraught. He tried to grasp both sides of the coffin as if to embrace his grandmother. In desperation he pulled violently, seemingly trying to smash the chains that were denying his hands and his heart. Finally, he bent down and laid his cheek against the still sticky, newly varnished casket and sobbed. The officers stood silent at either side, one impassive, the other, intense.

There was anger in the young man’s powerlessness. His frustration was tangible. He seemed impervious to the startled reactions of his family and relations. I wanted to walk over to him and hold him in that heart wrenching moment, to calm him at a time when words were worthless and only touch would heal. But I did not have the confidence. I was too overawed, too overwhelmed, by it all.

I had never witnessed anything like this before. The atmosphere was full of death and anger, of thwarted yearning, of desire and denial, of the strangest beauty in the middle of stark, raw emotion. If ever I experienced pathos, it was then and there.

Silently, another figure approached the small group at the coffin. It was the old woman’s daughter, the young man’s mother. Numbing grief and unbearable love filled her eyes. Gently, and with immense graced authority, she put her arms round her manacled son.

In a mutual kind of covenant, with a certainty and confidence beyond my understanding, she drew him to the nearest bench, near where I was standing. He lay across her lap, his limp body relaxed at last, his exhausted face on her shoulder, his dark hair lost against her black blouse. The police officers, aware of something beyond normal, remained at a discrete distance.

A friend of mine was at the funeral. Like me she was immediately locked into the unfolding drama, sensing something of the mystery of reality, of the interface between darkness and light, between death and life. As we watched that unforgettable scene of the mourning mother stroking and soothing her beloved son's head, an image of the *Pieta* came to her mind

As his two minders took Ben away to grieve alone, I was still shaken by the desperation of his efforts to express himself, to make contact with someone he adored, to break through into what was just beyond his reach. Another of Michelangelo's sculptures flashed before me. It was the carving of the 'emerging slaves'. Straining from the prison of their granite blocks, they were reaching for their freedom; confined in their darkness they were stretching, relentlessly for the light.

The intensity of that image touches something in all of us. In the scripture reading at the funeral, St. John reminded us that we are already the children of God, on the brink of blossoming into divine beauty. I am always filled with amazement at these words. I can scarcely believe what I am reading. We are filled with seeds, the glimpses, the echoes and the promise of the full possession of the divine essence. These real sentiments reverberate around the halls of our hearts. All of this is going to play havoc with our emotions and our grip on reality. We will, like Ben, be for ever reaching beyond our grasp, drawn and driven by powerful forces within us.

Some of our best spiritual writers remind us that, because of the fathomless mystery of Incarnation, the energies and potential of God's own self are wrapped up within us now. This must be too much to hold together. How can the precarious, fragile human spirit contain the infinitely transforming and ultimately divinizing power of God's enfleshed presence? Like atoms

we are waiting to explode. Like orphaned exiles of heaven, we are forever ready to risk escaping home. There is a loneliness and secret need in us all that normal human intimacy will never completely satisfy. And there are times and places in our lives – mysterious moments – when much spiritual conflict is brought home to us with almost unbearable intensity.

Ben's chained hands were hammering on the metal plate on the lid of the coffin that carried his grandmother's name. He was trying to break through confinement and impotence into another way of being. Are we not all tormented in the same way? If God has filled us with an insatiable yearning for life in its fullness towards what is always over the horizon for our possibilities, then is it any wonder that we are tortured by the futility of our efforts to transcend our mortality? Do any of us ever succeed in expressing our love fully? Do our childhood dreams and the hard reality of our adult lives ever remotely touch each other?

What kind of unspeakable loneliness, what inarticulate vision of fulfillment, would have, in the first place, driven that young man to drugs, theft and violence, to ruining his own life and that of his fiancée? And as we reflected afterwards on that intense moment of human experience, that brief disclosure of the pure passion of power and powerlessness, did we not all feel our own limitations? Did we not all somehow identify with the prisoner's rage, his inability to express the deepest desires of his heart just then, his frustrated outburst of despair? Were we not all battling with the chains around us, rattling the bars of our own cages, beating on the coffin of all that keeps us, too, captive?

The God within us is hungry for the light. The bright spark we are born with will for ever burn close to the cold casket of death. We only fall into frustration when we mistake the pearl of true light for the transitory imitation of fool's gold. When the vision is lost, hope goes too. We do not need to stand hammering anymore, like Ben, on the coffin of Good Friday. It is already open. We need not wait for the emerging slaves within us to escape the cold darkness. Once touched by the source of life, they can now run free, leaping and shouting, into the morning light.

The mystery of our humanity is only contained and given meaning once we set it against the bigger story of another reality, of a Risen Christ. In the *Pieta* image, Mary held, at once, the despair of her son's death, and the hope of his resurrection, within her arms. Her human heart, just then pulsing with intense grief and love, was able to transform and transcend the stark and dark reality that was enfolding her. Maybe this was what the grieving woman in the crematorium was able to do, too, when she touched the coffin of her dead mother with one hand and with the other, drew her living son to her loving, trusting breast. And in the shadow of recent terrorist madness, maybe that is what we are all called to do - to hold wanton death and undying love in the one embrace – if we are ever to find hope in our darkest times.

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