

BURIAL OF SENATOR GIL'S WIFE, PRINCESS ANNE NNAJI

Homily by Rev. Fr. Prof. Christian Anieke

Protocol

As a boy, a particular song in my small village in Umumba Ndiagu never ceased to fascinate me. This song goes like this:

Onwu bu onye oshi o

Onwu bu onye oshi o, o buru ogbalu nawa

(Death is a thief. He steals and zooms off with his booty.)

I wondered what death looked like. I thought then that death was a physical being, full of masculinity like Okwokwo of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. I wondered why death would always come, steal and escape without being arrested. I felt I could ask my father why our village men could not apprehend death. (I am pretty sure if I had known a lot of police officers then, the type we have today, I could have asked them to arrest death.)

As I grew up, I could hear other invectives being poured on death like sand in a Sahara windstorm: Onwu di njo (death is evil), onwu di egwu (death is terrifying), onwu ama-ako (death lacks wisdom), onwu eweuche (death is an idiot). Of course having been linguistically baptized in the language and dialect of my people, I drank a lot of abusive language and joined in the splash of unprintable liquids of vituperation against death. Death was a monster and must be annihilated with every verbal arsenal available to humans.

In the course of my life, I was surprised how our verbal abuses turned into pleas. I had no idea when we changed from abuse to placation: onwu biko (death have mercy or (in the Nigerian pidgin English) death a beg o). And later we declared death the winner: onwu emerie (death has won), owuka (death is greater), onwu zuruigbo (death is everywhere, omnipresent), etc.

As children we learnt the basic Catholic catechism, which we rattled off without any reflection: (Onye kele gi? Maka gini ka Chukwu jiri ke gi? G!n! ga-emee ma any! nw!o? Ekpo anyi ga-anwu, aru anyi eree ure , mkp!r!obi any! agaa n'ihu Chukwu ka ekpee ya ikpe.) As I grew up, each time someone died I struggled with all the images encapsulated in my village songs and death vocabulary (from abuse to resignation), and sometimes these images came clashing on my young mind against

the dogmatic background of undiluted Catholic catechism, and kick me into a mud of confusion and befuddlement. But gradually I began to assimilate and digest the liquid food of infant baptism and make some sense out of it. I felt consoled and strengthened by the message of victory over death. I saw that death could not have the last word because Jesus Christ had vanquished it on the Cross. The poet Elisabeth Frye underscores this point, which is the message of one of the prefaces of the Catholic mass that life is changed not ended:

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.
Mary Elizabeth Frye

In addition, the great English poet John Donne even makes a mockery of death:

DEATH BE NOT PROUD

John Donne (1573-1631)

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou thin'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death; nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be
Much pleasure, then, from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones and soul's delivery.
Thou'rt slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than they stroke. Why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Death even bows his head in shame in the beautiful poem on death by Rainer Maria Rilke:

Before us great Death stands

Our fate held close within his quiet hands.
When with proud joy we lift Life's red wine
To drink deep of the mystic shining cup
And ecstasy through all our being leaps—
Death bows his head and weeps

And I hear Princess Anne Nnenna Nnaji repeating the words of Henry Scott
Holland in his beautiful poem:

Death is nothing at all.
I have only slipped away to the next room.
I am I and you are you.
Whatever we were to each other,
That, we still are.

Call me by my old familiar name.
Speak to me in the easy way
which you always used.
Put no difference into your tone.
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed
at the little jokes we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me. Pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word
that it always was.
Let it be spoken without effect.
Without the trace of a shadow on it.

Life means all that it ever meant.
It is the same that it ever was.
There is absolute unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind
because I am out of sight?

I am but waiting for you.
For an interval.

Somewhere. Very near.
Just around the corner.

All is well.

And nothing re-echoes Anne's words more than the last line of this poem: All is well. In Ann's own words it is always: It's well. Or it is perfectly well!

Princess Anne Nnenna Nnaji entered our physio-temporal space on 16 December 1969. Her incandescent beauty and precocity made her turn heads wherever she went. While at Anambra State University of Science and Technology (now Nnamdi Azikiwe University), where she earned a Bachelor's degree in Applied Microbiology, her irresistible beauty brought her the prestigious Miss Campus Beauty Pageant Award. With such a radiant beauty and razor-sharp brain she had uncountable male eyes on her. Of course Anne did not lack self-consciousness. She knew that such a beauty as hers must find a match in an equally handsome and lovable young man. And she didn't need to search for such a Prince too long. In 1994 Gil felt he couldn't wait any longer and risk losing Anne to more ferocious gladiators. He took her to the altar and married her. Never in the history of human marriages has a man found such a perfect match as Gil found in Anne. Theirs was the story of young girl who lost her father very early in life and a young man who hardly knew his mother. A soul in need of a father found him in Gil. And Gil's soul crying for maternal care found it in Anne. It was more than mere marital love. For Gil Anne was both mama and sister whereas Anne saw Gil as the father she didn't enjoy and a brother. And they addressed each other as such. So one can imagine the the deep sea of sorrow at the loss of Anne.

Anne was everything Gil needed to succeed in life: pretty, smart, hardworking, humble, generous, sociable and prayerful. Not only did she round off her Bachelor's degree very successfully, she also did her Postgraduate diploma in Accounting and a Master's degree in Human Resources. While doing her normal job as a biology teacher, she started a small poultry in their house, which she developed to an enviable farm called Favour's Farms. She also established a small beauty salon which she worked hard to transform into Glamour Cosmetics in Abuja. In the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), she rose because of her diligence to the position of the Head of Protocol Unit of the Directorate of Public Affairs. Her assiduousness made her a very strong pillar on which the politician and our distinguished senator Prince Gilbert Nnaji leaned in the course of his political career.

As the saying goes, if you want to know the quality of a person's character, watch how he or she treats his or her subordinates. Anne could be canonized by the Catholic Church on this point. Most of her domestic staff comprise orphans and the so called wretched of the earth. Anne's attitude to them was to make them feel that they were not less human because of the cloud of poverty hanging imposingly over the landscape of their birth like a fog in a chilly Harmattan morning. She respected them and raised many of them the way she raised her own children. Uncountable

are the number of poor people Anne changed the story of their life from the lamentations of Job to the joyful lyrics of King Solomon.

What surprises many whose ways crossed hers was her unassuming disposition in spite of the family's comfortable pecuniary position. This quality not only endeared her to many but also brought a lot of political gains to her equally handsome and humble husband. Speaking on behalf of her classmates, Mrs Uju Osakwe described Anne as " a combination of beauty and brain, beautiful both in body and at heart, classless, accommodating, focused, never confused, firm in character, complete fighter, go-getter, reliable, friend in need, very, very forgiving, meekness and humility personified." And she continued, "When I rang my son telling him of Anne's death, he became quiet for a long while and then retorted that this earth does not even fit Auntie Anne. She belongs to Heaven." Anne belongs indeed to heaven. This particular young man underscores the message of the first reading from the Book of Wisdom 3: 1-9.

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them. They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; and their passing away was thought an affliction and their going forth from us, utter destruction. But they are in peace.

Yes, the soul of Anne is in the hand of God, and she is in peace!

Furthermore, we see the meaning and efficacy of human suffering in the words:
Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,
because God tried them
and found them worthy of himself.

As gold in the furnace, he proved them,
and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself.

In the time of their judgment they shall shine
and dart about as sparks through stubble;

Human suffering has the been subject of many arguments and writings in philosophy and theology. The scripture reveals its purifying effect in these words "as gold is purified in the furnace". The Book of Isaiah presents a good picture of the suffering servant of God, the purifying effect and efficacy of human suffering in these beautiful words:

See, my servant shall prosper,
he shall be raised high and greatly exalted.

Even as many were amazed at him—

so marred were his features,
beyond that of mortals
his appearance, beyond that of human beings—

So shall he startle many nations,
kings shall stand speechless;
For those who have not been told shall see,
those who have not heard shall ponder it.

Anne fought death like Beowulf in his last fight against the dragon. In her very challenging period of illness and trepidation, I could hear Anne using the words of the great English writer Virginia Woolf and addressing her beloved husband thus:

Dearest, I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier 'til this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that - everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.

— Virginia Woolf

It appears she lost the fight as the first reading indicates, but her reward will be great because she cared and loved to the last point of her life. Anne has been purified and transmogrified!

Throughout her life Anne cared deeply for Gil, who she called brother. She found a soul mate, a friend, a perfect husband, and brother in Gil. She realized that Gil was a mirror of herself in everything (except in that singular area where women excel: language..okwu...Germans have an expression: ein Mann ein Wort, eine Frau, ein Wörterbuch). Her generosity found an unmistakable match in Gil's boundless philanthropy. (I recall the last period of country-wide electioneering campaigns when politicians polluted our information landscape with all sorts jingles, some crashingly ridiculous. But there was this particular jingle about Gil which I once heard: Ahum onye Kwelum nkwa mele e, obu ome ogo. It was so sweet that I felt like jumping and dancing to the melodious tune). What attracted me to the jingle was not just the muscicality but its veracity. In his incredible philanthropy, Gil has never made a

promise he has not fulfilled. He is certainly not one of those politicians who will drown the world in a river of verbiages that empties itself in an ocean of nothingness, inaction and empty promises. I admire Gil's verbal frugality! This is where he beats any other politician I have ever known (our encounter in Frankfurt). My dearest friend Gil, you have seen the evidence of your philanthropy, humility and love of the Catholic Church today. (See the number of bishops, priests, reverend sisters, the religious from the Catholic Church and non-Catholic denominations). And this should be your consolation as you mourn the death of your beloved wife. As Anne reminds you constantly, she is not dead. She will continue to live through her many good works, and through your numerous works of charity, too!

To those of us who are still alive, a Catholic hymn says: stop, see the dead and see what you will be. If our politicians and hawkish contractors knew that one day they would be lying in their grave, they would not allow Enugu-Onitsha road and other major roads to provide jobs to morticians and turn every Friday into a funeral day. If they knew, if only they knew, they would be doing things differently. (Igbo: And all of us, let us remember our end. Let us stop unnecessary fights in the family... Even death has become a major source of family politics and fighting or a means of making money or merriment.) We often forget that one day we will be like the person we are burying.

Finally, Jesus says in today's gospel, "I am the way, the truth and the life." This great statement which falls within the circle of "I am words of Jesus (8 of them: I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the sheep gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life, the true wine, Before Abraham was, I am) is the "Kpim" (using Fr. Pantaleon Iroegbu's word) of Christology. As a great theologian Marcellino D'Ambrosio explains, "Christ Jesus is the way. Indeed he is a two way street. In him, God comes to meet us, holding back, offering everything of who he is and what he has. Through Him and Him alone, we have access to God to such a degree that we can now call him Abba, Father.

Jesus is the truth. Not just some truth but the entire truth. He is God's definitive and perfect Word expressing who God is, what He's like, who we are, and what we need to do to be saved from misery and futility.

And Jesus is the life. He gives us not only commandments and noble ideals, but also the power to live them out, the power to become new people. That Power is the Lord and Giver of Life Himself, the Holy Spirit, who Jesus pours out on those who accept Him."

So there is only one Way, one Truth, one Life, one Priest who offers a perfect sacrifice for sins.

Let us follow him, his teachings, his humility, his truth, his love, his whole life and surely we will find our place in the room he has prepared for us.

And today in the light of today's gospel I hear the voice of Anne telling each of us:

If only

If only we could see the splendour of the land
To which our loved ones are called from you and me
We'd understand
If only we could hear the welcome they receive
From old familiar voices all so dear
We would not grieve
If only we could know the reason why they went
We'd smile and wipe away the tears that flow
And wait content.

(An Anonymous Poem)

May your soul our dearest Anne, and the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace!

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