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The Death of Death

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The Death of Death (I)

This exquisite sermon was given by Austin Farrer, Warden of Keble College, Oxford, from 1960 to 1968. The reference at the end to the painting at Keble College Chapel is particularly significant. The same painting of William Holman Hunt is depicted in our stained glass window on the front right hand side of the Church. You can see it illuminated at night.

We are all mortal; and so it's no use a clergyman's treating it as a matter of surprise that occasions for him to read the burial service are not infrequent. If a man had a parish of 24,000, he might expect to bury one a day. I do not want you to work out the arithmetical basis of that calculation, for if you are so occupied you will not be listening to what I want to tell you. If the priest works the sum, his arithmetic can remove from his mind any surprise he might feel at the frequency of such ceremonies; he finds himself, time after time, assuring the mourners on the authority of St. Paul that we shall not all sleep the sleep of death, but we shall all be transformed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; so that we, who have hitherto led a flesh-and-blood existence, will be changed into the substance of glory.

I do not know how useful it is to relay St. Paul's speculation to the Christian mourners of today, but I do think it is worthwhile our reflecting on it, just because it involves us—creatures of flesh and blood—in a head-on collision with Omnipotence. No doubt we think, or half think, we have to undergo such a collision in a disembodied state, when there will be no more evasion, and we meet Truth himself face to face.

But when we think of this, our imaginations are not moved: for we have a hazy feeling that anything might happen to a disembodied spirit: we know not what we shall be and for all we know, meeting with deity may be all in the day's work then. But the mental shock is real, if we conceive of ourselves such as we now are undergoing that divine encounter. What would happen? St. Paul says, we would be changed; and we do not need to go outside those few words, to touch the height of amazement. We should be changed: changed—and how? St. Paul speaks of the seed corn changed into the plant of wheat, and others, more appropriately perhaps, have talked of the chrysalis becoming a

moth or the larva a dragonfly.

I once lay in a punt on the Cherwell, spellbound for an hour, watching the dragonfly miracle; and indeed it was amazing enough. Yet it certainly did not happen in the twinkle of an eye, but through an agony of birth: slow, yes, agonizingly slow. Nor was it a miracle, after all, for it was all in the way of nature: the expansion of what had been folded, the liberation of what had been compressed. For in the works of nature God works naturally; that there should be dragonflies at all, not to mention men, is a breath-taking wonder, if we think of those mere rudiments of being from which such creatures are evolved—not surely without a power divine. Yet the Creator's will had waited ages for such things to work themselves out by the action of inborn energies, under the infinitely subtle and unforced persuasion of invisible providence. But then, says St. Paul, in the twinkle of an eye, we shall be changed: God will no longer wait for the ripening of nature nor restrict his action within nature's bounds; for this is where nature ends. We shall be changed, in the twinkling of an eye, for all this bodily being of ours will utterly melt at the touch of our maker and offer not a moment's resistance to his purest thought, his most absolute will; suddenly our being will become the simple print of his intention for us.

You and I may pray, as our Saviour taught us, Thy will be done, and wish we may be wax in the hands of Almighty Love; and Mercy will accept our true desire, while knowing how slow is the ripening of our virtue and how many obstacles the coarseness of our flesh and blood opposes to our maker's purpose. But it will be otherwise when we are changed, in the twinkling of an eye; then God will have his way with us, and to experience this will be to know God indeed. For the invisible Creator is known to his creatures in his creating of them; and when he freely and without obstacle fashions us, he will be perfectly known, felt as it were in the pressure of his fingers and read in the expression of his creative thoughts. Shall not we be ourselves the embodied thoughts of God, when we are changed?

But what are we doing? We've let St. Paul's speculation run away with us. Is nature to melt in the rays of insupportable light that God may be all in all? Not, perhaps, without first passing through a natural death: perhaps in spite of St. Paul, we all shall sleep, before we are any of us changed. Certainly, whatever St. Paul may have thought, he slept the sleep of death, he and all the generation he addressed; they did not hear in this world the blast of the archangel, the trump of God.

Still, we needn't be too hard on the Apostle. How was he to know the very form and timing of events yet to come? He was bound to think that some day, and in some way, the whole being of the saints must become glass to God's thoughts and wax to his will. So much for looking forward—and then, as for looking backward, he had seen it happen. Had he not seen the Lord, the risen Lord? At one point nature and history had melted in the immediate ray of power. A body was laid in the tomb, a living, speaking glory issued from it.

To be continued...

The Rev. Austin Farrer

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