

## 2019 Easter Homily

A poem by George Mackay Brown transports us into an Orkney home where line by line, different characters gather to play their part in support of a grieving widow. It's as if the walls of the small cottage expand as more people arrive. The only references to the deceased husband are oblique. One in which the cat has presumably jumped onto the open coffin; the second comes in the final line when the widow is introduced.

Each sentence opens with the word *Came*, as *in then came...* announcing each new visitor as if they are arriving on a stage set; and like stage characters some bring props (whisky, bread, salt, oil and a shroud) Others perform tasks appropriate to their station in life. You might like to listen out for a quartet of children, the priest and the old one (who I suspect is a woman).

*Came, their eyes four puddles, the women of  
Park.*

*Came, with a flagon of whisky, Quernstones.*

*(And the biggest bowl was filled*

*And a honeycomb broken*

*And a pot of water hung over the red-tongued  
peat.)*

*Came the nose of the cat and quizzed the tied  
jaw,*

*Cold kissing cold.*

*Came the minister, a black column of words.*

*Came the five bairns of Bunertoon, hill dancers,  
But furred their feet in the door.*

*Came an old one with a shroud*

*(And drenched the house with grief, biography,  
moth balls).*

*Came the fisherman's wife with a dish of salt  
And a jar of oil.*

*Came the wife of Greups with circles of smoking  
bread.*

*The widow sat in his chair, a black queen.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Funeral* by George Mackay Brown

No commentary comes with this poem and so I cannot say whether it records a real event or not. Either way it describes a way of doing things that the inhabitants of Orkney in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century would undoubtedly have recognised.

For as we know, every culture and society devises its own rituals to accompany death. Some focus on showing respect to the memory and mortal remains of the deceased; others are intended to offer consolation and encouragement to the bereaved; at best they accomplish all these things. A mixture of expected customary rituals along with sincere personal sympathy can help us come to terms with loss and recover hope.

So, we can only imagine the shock of the women who, following the conventions of their own culture, approached the tomb where the body of Jesus had been lain to rest after the trauma of Calvary only to discover that their loved one had been stolen from them twice over.

How distraught they must have felt, how doubly bereft. Having been helpless witnesses at his execution they now their preparations for tending his lifeless body are pointless. They are redundant... again!

The news they were to receive from the two radiant messengers was last thing on their minds. Little wonder then that their male colleagues' first response was so dismissive.

But a seed of hope had been planted in their hearts, an echo perhaps of some of Jesus' more enigmatic sayings; the things that had most perplexed them when he had spoken most personally of himself. Words, that carried more meaning now; than had been immediately obvious.

And so they discovered that they were indeed deprived of any opportunity to pay respects to a dead friend, because death itself had been subverted. There was no vacancy on Christ's seat of glory!

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