

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, an Episcopal Church, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Thursday, 24 June 2010, the feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, at the funeral of Ragna Ellen Stone, Laura Leigh Stone-Mortimer, Thomas "Finn" Mortimer V, and Charlotte Mortimer, whose homicides occurred on 16 June 2010, and who were laid to rest following the Eucharist on the 24th. May their souls, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.*

We can feel the numbness in the air, even the weather is heavy-laden. In some ways feeling numb has helped us. Most of us don't have a lot of experience with this kind of absolute horror, nor have many of us known this depth of sorrow and confusion. In any case, we *shouldn't*, and so if this feels foreign, or if you've come here this morning not exactly sure why, or wonder how you could possibly get through this, perhaps there's an invitation to turn to God in a kind of gratitude for this strong sense of feeling numb.

The numbness enables us to put one foot in front of the other. But we turn to God this morning to encounter something more than numbness.

We've come into this majestic church, with its beauty and strength, to speak and to listen with an ancient language. This language is used rarely--beyond sacred, religious, or spiritual circles. But right now its cadence and vocabulary become our companions. So we speak of paralyzing helplessness and unadulterated confusion.

We speak too of evil, and of powerlessness, and of anger, and of our need to make sense of this tragedy...we are so needy this morning. And I know well that all of those words, strong words which we're careful not to use most days, are words we can use in church. They're words we use because here in this place those words--this language--actually pushes us from mere numbness into expression.

And expression is what funerals are all about. We have something, finally, to do. Our worship of God, with our formal prayers and these old-fashioned hymns and anthems, opens our hearts to our neediness, our poverty. We start to pull something upstream, and the struggle actually frees us, in some inexplicable way. This is where God meets us. And in our praying and grieving, we do our part to send Finn and Charlotte, and Ellen, and Laura into God's mercy.

We soon find other words in this same language. Equally strong, and for some of us, not common parlance. We say "God's grace", we imagine the Lord of Life who took children into his arms, caressing and holding Finn and Charlotte. The strongest word we use is resurrection, and after that, hope, and we keep pulling ourselves upstream until we reach the gentle waters of God's own river of peace and wholeness.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn" and so we're here to mourn, of course, but also to receive blessing. There's no illusion that we can do this ourselves. We need Christ Jesus, and so this ancient liturgy, and the presence of the bodies inside the church reminds us that this terrible thing has happened. Debra and Dave put the palls on top of these caskets, and I suspect for many of us the poverty and the pain in that moment were unspeakable.

Yet flinching from what has taken place won't help, so we express it with strong language, and with bold gestures of honesty, and of hope. And they evoke for us Christ's own struggle with life and with death.

Sometimes the most powerful moments in our relationship with God are when we're the most powerless. That was true for Jesus. He knew about numbness and overwhelming grief. It's why he wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. And it's why he could preach so effectively on that

mountain. He says that we're blessed when we mourn, for we shall be comforted; and we're blessed when we're poor in spirit, for then we live in the kingdom of God. I think the kingdom, in this moment, is finding rest in a God who is with us, not a God who causes these things to happen. That same Jesus who wept, who suffered and who himself died is the same Jesus who has gone before us into a new creation that gives us hope to keep living. Ellen, and Laura, and Finn, and Charlotte now live in that new creation. A river whose streams are made glad.

You may be too burdened today to feel that hope, but there is hope for tomorrow. For each of them, the burden has been laid down. God's future holds the bright promise that nothing will be lost, that all that is good and lovely and beautiful will be recreated in the resurrection of the dead.

What do we do in the meantime? We live as though the new creation was already here. We live knowing that God wept with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross, and now God weeps here. As God cries, Christ himself holds two precious children, their mother, and their Cha-Cha.

Whether you've come here strengthened in your atheism, or weakened in your faith, understand that we're not asked to solve this today. Nobody expects us to figure this out. God's promise is that this day Ellen's laughter is a happier; Laura's wisdom is even greater; Finn's thoughtfulness is deeper; Charlotte's innocence is more precious.

Yesterday the preschool community where Finn was a student, and where Charlotte would have matriculated this Fall, planted a pink weeping willow. A perfect choice for those graceful and tender children. Afterwards the head of the school went over to make sure it had plenty of water, and as she poured the water, two adorable sparrows landed on the delicate branch of the newly-planted tree. She said to me that in that moment she knew they were all in good hands.

We're in good hands too. We'll need to gather again at that river which we sang about a few moments ago. We'll need to gather there many times in the days and weeks and years to come.

But in our struggle and numbness to find our way here today we have already been to the river. It's the shining river of an Altar where Christ pours himself out in heartache, and offers himself to every one of us as a comforter and as a friend. It's a beautiful river whose silver spray washed them in their baptisms, and we'll take that same water to sprinkle them for their eternal rest. It's the water used at yesterday's tree planting, and it's the water that runs down our cheeks in the shape of tears, and gets wiped away by Christ's self...that's why we're in good hands.

Questions remain, and the journey from this place will have its own set of twists and turns, like every river. But right now, let's take our lead from this courageous family, whose new lives to which they've been raised in Jesus Christ, are abundant, resplendent in light, and flowing by the throne of God.