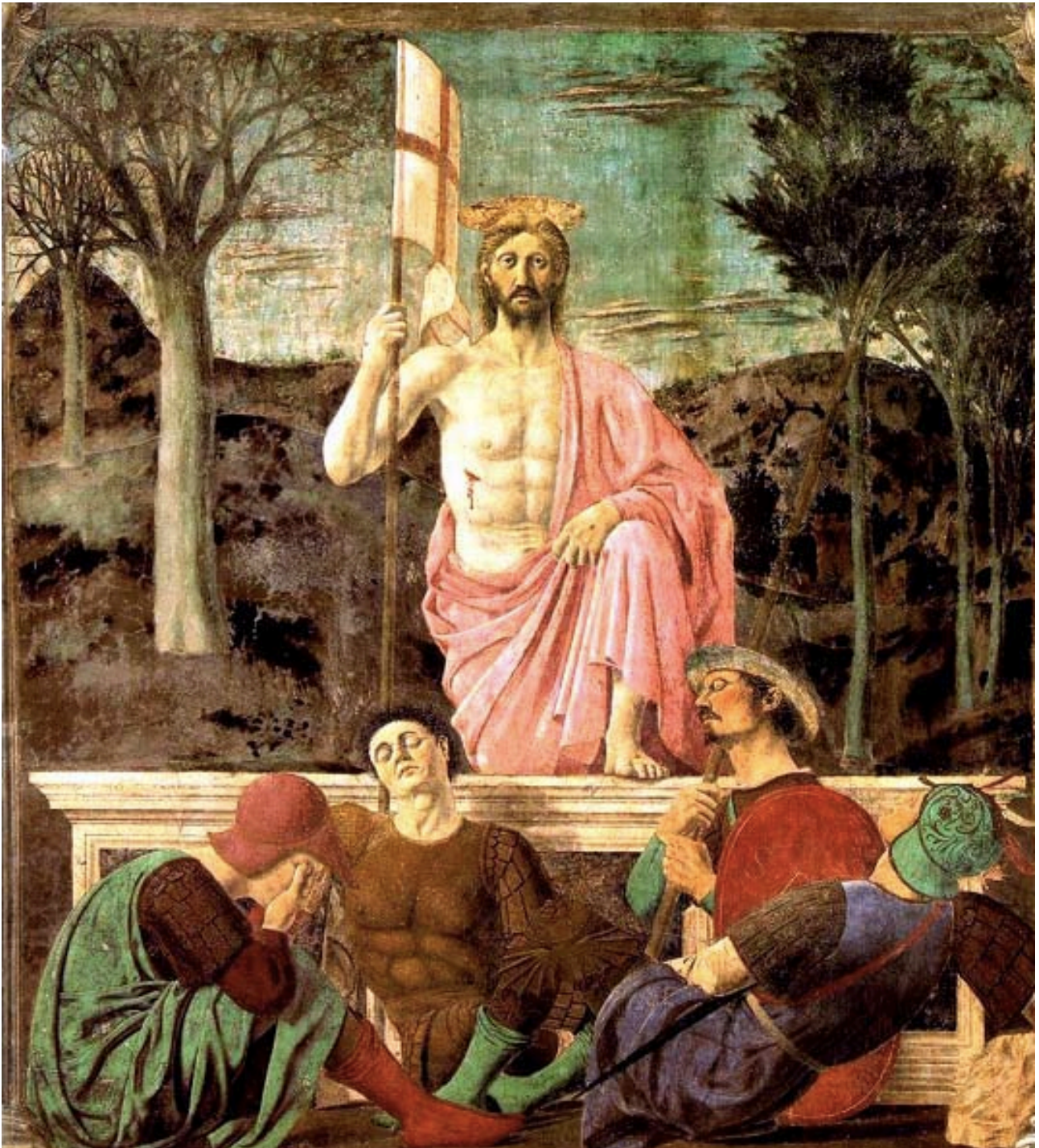


# Sermon

'Death be not proud'

Funeral service for Nan Woods, Easter season, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2021



Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me...  
[For] One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more, death thou shalt die.

In the 2001 film 'Wit', Emma Thompson plays Professor Vivian Bearing, a specialist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century English writer and Anglican cleric, John Donne. Diagnosed with a terminal illness, Vivian is forced to reassess her life. As she finds inspiration from her earlier time as a university student, studying under the renowned professor Evelyn Ashford, played by Eileen Atkins. In one flash back, marking Vivian's assignment on Donne's poem, Death be not proud, Evelyn says:

'Do you think that the punctuation of the last line of this sonnet is merely an insignificant detail? The sonnet begins with a valiant struggle with death, calling on all the forces of intellect and drama to vanquish the enemy. But it is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly insuperable barriers separating life death and eternal life. In the edition you chose, this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical punctuation. And Death, Capital D, shall be no more, semi-colon. Death, Capital D comma, thou shalt die, exclamation mark! If you go in for this sort of thing I suggest you take up Shakespeare.

Gardner's edition of the Holy Sonnets returns to the Westmoreland manuscript of 1610, not for sentimental reasons I assure you, but because Helen Gardner is a scholar. It reads, "And death shall be no more" comma "death, thou shalt die." Nothing but a breath, a comma separates life from life everlasting. Very simple,

really. With the original punctuation restored death is no longer something to act out on a stage with exclamation marks. It is a comma. A pause. Life, death, soul, God, past present. Not insuperable barriers. Not semi-colons. Just a comma.'

At the end of Vivian's life, it is Evelyn who is there to comfort her. Climbing into Vivian's isolation bed, she holds her friends in her arms, to reassure her, at her final hour, saying. 'Dear, dear, Vivian. There, there. Don't worry, dear.' Reaching into her bag, she opens a children's book, belonging to her grandson, and begins to read:

'Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother I am running away. If you run away said his mother I will run after you for you are my little bunny. If you run after me said the little bunny I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you. If you become a fish in a trout stream said his mother I will become a fisherman. And I will fish for you.'

'Ah, look at that!' Evelyn says. 'A little allegory of the soul. Wherever it hides, God will find it.'

'Shucks said the little bunny. I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny. And so he did. 'Have a carrot' said the mother bunny.'

Closing the book, and seeing that Vivian's time had come, Evelyn said, 'It's time to go. And may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.'

As Vivian dies, as she lived. Since first reading 'The Tale of Peter Rabbit' as a young girl, in awe, at the meaning to be found in the ministry of words and pictures.

The meaning of the word picture presented in our Gospels today, is that in Jesus Christ, the transfiguration of this world, in the illuminating power and glory of God, has now come into a dark world. That in the darkness of this world, there is a light that shines. That the resurrection of Jesus was not a simple return to life. A mere resuscitation. The resurrection was the entry into this world of a new kind of human life. A human life, fully lived. A life glorified, transfigured, for eternal life. A life beyond death. Where mourning and crying and pain are no more. Where the old order, the present order of things is passed. Where God himself, 'is making all things new.'

This new life does not overlook the old. It completes it. Fulfilling it. Perfecting it. We see this in the almost identical nature of Jesus resurrection appearances, with his earthly life. In his call to them as fishermen, to follow him. In his breaking of the bread with them. Jesus is, who he was.

And yet now transfigured by God's Spirit for eternal life. For glorified, resurrected, eternal life. For everlasting life in the kingdom of God. A world without end.

At around 7:30 on Thursday evening, having completed her work in this world, and in the presence of her family, Nan prayed a final prayer, and breathed her last. And flights of angels sang her to her rest. To the blessed relief, of eternal life. To that same glorified, transfigured, resurrected life in which Jesus now lives. A life that awaits each one of us at our end. And that awaits the world at its end. When death will be no more. When mourning and crying and pain will be no more. When this world has passed away. When God has made all things new.

Into this brave new world, this brave new hope, this brave new Lord, we were all baptised. Into this new world, this hope, this Lord, we are called each day, out of darkness, into marvelous light.

Reconciled to God, by the once for sacrifice of Christ, as the people of God, we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. As this has now come in Jesus of Nazareth. As this has now come in Nancy Woods.

And is God's promise to everyone who acknowledges him before others in their life on earth. Jesus will acknowledge them at the end of history, whether of their own, or of the world. As Nan in her life acknowledged Jesus. And who came to her, as flights of angels sang her to her rest.

Into that strange, unmapped new land,  
Round the forbidden corner, through  
The locked and bolted door, we grope,  
Prisoners released upon a larger world.  
New freedoms frighten us. We clutch  
Old tasks, familiar ways. Come now  
Lord of the old and new, disclose  
To our explorers eyes your new-found land.

Amen