

Richard Stephen Ortiger: Funeral Homily, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2024

After Fr Stephen's death, I came across a document in which he was jotting down some of his favourite instances of a very English figure of speech, one that is given the very un-English name of *paraprosdokian*.

*Paraprosdokian* is the technical term for a kind of sentence that might be said to lead us 'up the garden path' towards a surprise: a sentence whose ending is so unexpected that it causes us, as we listen, completely to reinterpret what we heard at the beginning.

'The voice of Love seemed to call to me, but it was a wrong number', to offer an example from Fr Stephen's favourite writer, P. G. Wodehouse. A *paraprosdokian* involves so abrupt a reversal of expectation that we might think of it as almost a spoken hand-break turn.

The *paraprosdokian* is beloved of those who write and speak memorably; humourists, orators, and – of course – Fr Stephen himself: Stephen's working list includes quite a few Wodehousian examples, along with a fair smattering from Churchill ('If I agreed with you, we'd both be wrong') and, from across the Atlantic, Groucho Marx, who made this style of one-liner peculiarly his own – 'I've had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn't it'.

Fr Stephen, we all know, as well as delighting in unexpectedly striking, and usually humorous, phraseology, loved the many forms of plays-upon-words the English language allows. If Stephen himself was speaking to us today, he would be concerned to establish that we were all thoroughly 'gruntled'; that is, 'put in a good humour'. (A lovely linguistic 'back-formation', as grammarians call this trick; a verbal back-flip allowing one to coin a wholly positive word from the significantly rather bleaker, 'dis-gruntled'.)

'Does your theology make you smile?', Fr Stephen would sometimes ask a congregation, and you will know as well as I do that, if he suspected the answer might not be 'yes', we would all be invited, and perhaps invited at some length, to think again. I know, both from what Stephen wrote and from what he told me, that it was his fervent hope that his funeral today would be the occasion not of the sadness that inevitably attends upon partings but most especially of shared Christian smiles, or – as Stephen would surely have put it – the occasion of much 'gruntlement' among his brethren, his family, and his friends.

A Christian funeral, we might say, shifting as Fr Stephen so often would into *Jeeves mode*, is like a liturgical *paraprosdokian*; "*para*, Sir," said Jeeves, "meaning 'against' and *prosdokian* meaning 'expectation' ". Against the worldly expectation of sadness in the face of loss, a Christian funeral asserts, with Fr Stephen and with the Prophet Isaiah, the startling ending of the story, an ending that changes all that has gone before: 'the Lord GOD will swallow up death for ever; and he will wipe away tears from all faces.' For Fr Stephen, God wants us all thoroughly 'chuffed'.

It might seem paradoxical to urge that a funeral should be a time for the mourners to appear in what Wodehouse would have called, 'mid-season form'. But Fr Stephen insisted, and I'm quoting him here, "I have had a very blessed life; 'spoilt rotten' could well be written after my name. I think of this world as a second womb; after eighty or so years there

comes a second transition, a further birth into, yes, a much wider and very different world; hooray, hurrah again!”

Fr Stephen was deeply influenced for the whole of his ‘very blessed life’ by his formative years at St Gregory’s, Downside. Here he attended Senior School, and here one of his many blessings was to encounter a quality of teaching and a depth of Catholic spirituality that would remain with him, forming a bedrock for his mature monastic living and thinking.

One figure especially stands out in Stephen’s memories of his Downside years: Fr Aelred Watkin, who according to the school timetable taught history (a subject Stephen would engage with throughout his life), but who in practice was in the business of what today we would term both spiritual and human formation.

Stephen reflected many years later: ‘Did [Fr Aelred] teach us History? Yes. Did he teach us English Literature? Yes. Did he teach us Theology? Yes. Did he teach us Spirituality? Yes. And he was insistent that we should learn with our hearts as well as our heads, with our senses as well as our minds [...] The object of the exercise was, as he was fond of saying, ‘to arouse the sensibilities’, to bring our humanity to vibrant life’.

Fr Stephen cited with warm approval a passage from one of Fr Aelred’s books:

*‘Our religion reaches down to the roots of ordinary human experience....it is here that God reveals himself to us and transforms into significance and into eternal value what would otherwise be a disconnected series of passing episodes and a pattern of shifting shadows’.*  
(Aelred Watkin: *The Enemies of Love*)

Comments Fr Stephen: ‘I found this terrific then, and I find it terrific now’.

‘Terrific’ because, as Stephen went on to discover for himself as a man, a monk, and a pastor, ‘*the roots of ordinary human experience*’, our seemingly most trivial daily moments, perhaps especially those uncomfortable experiences of hurt or of vulnerability, ‘can be moments of grace, a nudge from God, an experience of the continual pressure of God’s grace urging us to *be ourselves*’.

Fr Stephen was painfully aware that it is only too easy *not* to be oneself. ‘It would be unfortunate indeed,’ he wrote, ‘to reach the end of our lives and to realise that, for whatever reason, we had led another’s life.’

Fr Aelred’s teaching that the work of the Incarnation is continued and made manifest in ordinary human experience, the stuff of which life is made, had great power for Stephen, as did his understanding that God works through our everyday experience to enliven the true self we are meant to be. This approach underlies one of Stephen’s own favourite themes: our what-ness (*what* I do is a job) over against our who-ness (*who* I am is a person). ‘Our names’, Stephen would say, ‘are different from our titles. Our name describes *who* we are, our title describes *what* we do. Our temptation’, Stephen would continue, ‘is to confuse our who-ness and our what-ness, to confuse who I am with what I do.’ For Stephen, learning from Fr Aelred, God works through the experiences of our lives to teach us *who* we are, not *what* task we are to do. God brings our true self, our *who*-self, fully to life.

Nevertheless, for much of his adult life, Stephen, the accessible friend and ebullient pastor, was burdened with a sense that when he looked into the depths of his own 'who-ness' he would find, not what Fr Aelred Watkin had termed '*significance and eternal value*', but only a '*pattern of shifting shadows*'.

At times, this insecurity and anxiety drove Stephen energetically to seek his significance outside himself, in a preoccupation with 'what-ness', a driven *doing*, that he himself likened to a 'hunger': the over-busy Pastor, the 'small, friendly, Headmaster', the role of being the Abbot. He experienced a need to validate himself through demanding work, leading responsibilities or novel undertakings; it was as if he sought to prove *to himself* that he was of significance, of eternal value. Stephen carried a weight of personal over-sensitivity and vulnerability which left him too easily bruised, often deeply, by perceived slights. Painfully, both for Stephen himself and – I'm afraid – sometimes for those around him, he was able to arrive, over time, at the realisation that this driven-ness, this 'hunger', was not the route set before him by the God he believed was working to bring his 'humanity to vibrant life'.

In his later years, Fr Stephen reflected on aspects of this process of *real-self*-discovery, writing, for example, of a parishioner who had said to him, 'I realise now that I have been a stranger to myself; I have let everyone else into my house but stayed outside myself'. He recognised that this parishioner spoke also for Stephen himself. He comments that she had shared 'wonderful and memorable words. She saw that she had been intent on pleasing others, keeping them happy, and, in the process, had neglected herself, omitted to attend to her own needs'.

Deploying one of his favourite expressions, borrowed like so many from A. A. Milne, Stephen identified this self-evading approach to life as a 'Heffalump Trap', a trap into which he knew that he himself had sometimes fallen. Seeking to escape the Heffalump Trap, while at the same time offering a helping hand to others facing similar struggles, Stephen wrote that Christianity 'is about loving ourselves as well as our neighbours; God does not call us to be door-mats or Kamikaze pilots; we are called to cherish and care for that part of creation which confronts us when we look in the mirror, to bring our God-given selves to a God-intended maturity'.

It was surely in no small part because Stephen had himself so authentically, even painfully, trodden this path, or should one say, 'suffered this fall', that his preaching and speaking was so powerful, his ministry so well received, and his friendship affected such a large number of those who met and heard him.

He liked to reflect that, 'Monastic life, my chosen path, is often described as a *locus* for finding God, and so it is. Equally, it is a context for being found. In fact, God is not lost but it is possible, probable, that *we* are, that our real self is not yet centre-stage, and God will not rest until, in his company and with his help, we find that true self.'

And so, although in gathering for this funeral we all recognise – in another of Stephen's favourite images – the sorrowful reality of a 'bright sword sheathed', our Christian joy, hope, and yes, our 'gruntlement' in Jesus's Resurrection, which was Stephen's own 'gruntlement', rightly suffuses this solemn liturgy. Today we give thanks for and we

celebrate the final finding and fulfilment of Fr Stephen's true self, his life of Christian witness; an ultimately joyous witness that touched so many other lives, a life we believe in faith – to echo the mass of Christian death – now to be 'changed, not ended'.

And perhaps we might add, as Fr Stephen would surely want us to, that the living, dying and rising to New Life of Jesus Christ is in fact God's own *paraprosdokian*, a surprising 'change, not ending' to the world's story, which renders it no longer a tragedy but rather a *Divine Comedy*; transforming and re-writing what has gone before, so that our theology can now cause us not only to smile but to laugh aloud, crying out with Isaiah:

This is the LORD; we have waited for him;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

In what we now know would be Fr Stephen's final years, ministering 'on loan to the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton' as he liked to put it, in the Parish of Our Lady, Star of the Sea in East Preston, I know that Stephen found a real peace and joy in parish pastoral ministry.

Monastically, he liked to tell me, he was living as a hermit. I confess, I was tempted to reference the comment made by Thomas Merton's abbot when Merton himself said that he aspired to the eremitical life: 'You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying "hermit" '.

But, of course, Times Square is in New York, not East Preston.

St Paul tells us that neither 'height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. I can't help thinking that Stephen chose that text in no small part because of the 'height and depth' reference. As we contemplate God's eternal 'wider and very different world', wrote Stephen at the very end of his life, 'we are like caterpillars wondering what it is like to be butterflies. But,' he concluded, 'I'm delighted that flying will be a part of it'.

Among his posthumous papers, Stephen left a copy of the poem, 'High Flight' by John Gillespie Magee, Jr., a WW2 fighter pilot and poet.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air . . .  
Up, up the long, delirious burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.