

Thomas More Reader: Meditations on Death: Part Two

104. "An Old Man Speaks with Death"

[From *The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight* ; Works, p. 884b]

Then if they were invited into religion on the other fashion and were said unto them thus:-

"Sirs, we will not bid you live so straight in religion as these men should have done. Come on and enter and do but even as they did, and then shall you there have a good easy life and a wealthy, and much worldly praise, therewith."

I ween a man should not yet for all that get them to go to it. But as easy as we call it and as wealthy too (and, peradventure, when our wives are angry, wish ourselves therein), yet if it were thus offered, we would play as Aesop telleth a fable of a poor old man which, bearing up an hill a burden of bushes in his neck, for help of his necessity, panting for weariness, in the mid-way laid down his burden and sat him down and sighed, and waxed so weary of his life that he wished and called for Death.

Whereupon Death came anon readily toward him and asked him, "What wilt thou with me?" But when the poor fellow saw him, that lean, whoreson, there so ready:—

"I called you, Sir," quoth he, "to pray you do so much for me as help me up again with this bitched burden and lay it in my neck."

So ween I that for all our words, if that easy life and wealth that is in religion were offered us, as weary as we be of wedding we would rather abide all our old pain abroad than in a cloister take a religious man's life for ease.

NOTES

(1) **bitched** : "cursed," "execrable": cf. Chaucer, "This fruyt cometh of the bicched bones two" [i.e., dice], ("Pardoner's Tale," VI, 656). More elsewhere (*Works* , p. 941) refers sarcastically to the Protestant reformers in an alliterative tour de force: "blessed bitched new broached brotherhood." (See also above, No. 55, n. 3).

105. "The Cruel Hangman, Death"

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* ; Works, pp. 1243b-1244a]

[Anthony] "And is not then, Cousin, by your own granting before, every man a prisoner when he is put in a place to be kept to be brought forth when he would not, and himself wot not wither?"

[Vincent] "Yes, in good faith, Uncle. I cannot but well perceive this to be so."

[Anthony] "This were, you wot well, true, although a man should be but taken by the arm and in fair manner led out of this world unto his judgment. But now while we well know that there is no king so great but that all the while he walketh here, walk he never so loose, ride he with never so strong an army for his defence, yet himself is very sure though he seek in the mean season some other pastime to put it out of his mind, yet is he very sure, I say, that escape can he not, and very well he knoweth that he hath already sentence given upon him to die and that verily die he shall, and that himself though he hope upon long respite of his execution yet can he not tell how soon, and therefore (but if he be a fool) he can never be without fear that either on the morrow or on the self same day the grisly cruel Hangman, Death, which from his first coming in hath ever hoved aloof and looked toward him and ever lying in wait on him, shall amidmong all his royalty and all his main strength never kneel before him nor make him any reverence, nor with any good manner desire him to come forth, but rigorously and fiercely grip him by the very breast and make all his bones rattle! And so by long and divers sore torments strike him stark dead in this prison, and then cause his body to be cast into the ground in a foul pit, within some corner of the same, there to rot and be eaten with the wretched worms of the earth, sending yet his soul out farther unto a more fearful judgment whereof at his temporal death his success is uncertain and therefore, though by God's grace not out of good hope, yet for all that in the meanwhile in very sore dread and fear and, peradventure, in peril inevitable of eternal fire, too. Methinketh, therefore Cousin that (as I told you) this keeping of every man in this wretched world for execution of death is a very plain imprisonment indeed.

"And that (as I say) such that the greatest king is in this prison in much worse case in all his wealth than many a man is by the other imprisonment that is therein sore and hardly handled. For where some of those lie not there attained nor condemned to death, the greatest man of this world, and the most wealthy in this universal prison, is laid in to be kept undoubtedly for death."

NOTES

(1) Sir Thomas More undoubtedly ponders here his own inevitable and imminent execution for having refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to the Act of Succession.

106. "Christ in His Passion"

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* ; Works, pp. 1260a-b]

[Anthony] "Surely, Cousin, as I said before, in bearing the loss of worldly goods, in suffering of captivity, thralldom and imprisonment, and in the glad sustaining of worldly shame, that, if we would in all those points deeply ponder the example of our Saviour Himself, it were of itself alone sufficient to encourage every kind Christian man and woman to refuse none of all those calamities for His sake; so say I now for painful death also, that if we could and would with due compassion conceive in our minds a right imagination and remembrance of Christ's bitter painful Passion, of the many sore bloody strokes that the cruel tormentors with rods and whips gave Him upon every part of His holy tender body; the scornful crown of sharp thorns beaten down upon

His holy head, so strait and so deep that on every part his blessed blood issued out and streamed down; his lovely limbs drawn and stretched out upon the cross, to the intolerable pain of his fore-beaten and sore beaten veins and sinews—new feeling with the cruel stretching and straining—pain far passing any cramp, in every part of His blessed body at once. Then the great long nails cruelly driven with hammers through His holy hands and feet. And in this horrible pain, lift up and let hang with the peise of all his body bearing down upon the painful wounded places so grievously pierced with nails. And in such torment (without pity, but not without many despites), suffered to be pinned and pained the space of more than three long hours, till Himself willingly gave up unto His Father His holy soul, after which, yet to shew the mightiness of their malice, after His holy soul departed, they pierced His holy heart with a sharp spear, at which issued out the holy blood and water, whereof His holy sacraments have inestimable secret strength.

If we would, I say, remember these things in such wise as would God we would, I verily suppose that the consideration of his incomparable kindness could not fail in such wise to inflame our key-cold hearts and set them on fire in his love [so] that we should find ourselves not only content but also glad and desirous to suffer death for His sake, that so marvelous lovingly letted not to sustain so far-passing painful death for ours."

NOTES

(1) More's vivid portrait of **Christ's Passion**—a popular medieval theme—vies in dramatic intensity and poetic beauty with any such medieval portrait, and is comparable in its aesthetic and spiritual effect to the representations of Christ on the Cross in oil, wood or stone.

(2) Christ's Passion refers strictly to "the suffering of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death," with emphasis upon the pain and agony of his suffering on the cross. Of More's three last major works, all written in the Tower of London and containing material relevant to Christ's last hours, only the *Dialogue of Comfort* contains a graphic, if brief, description of Christ on the cross (here recorded). The other two works, *The Treatise on the Passion* and *De Tristitia Christi* ("On the Sadness of Christ") suggest a final graphic scene is forthcoming but in fact contain no such episode. *The Treatise on the Passion* (never reprinted since the 1557 folio by William Rastell, and now edited by Garry E. Haupt (CW 13) contains lectures and prayers on the *Old Testament*, especially "Genesis," details of events leading up to The Last Supper, and on the meaning of the Eucharist, including "Protestant Interpretations of the Eucharist" (!) with final comments by the early Church Fathers—a jumble of loosely coordinated insights.

De Tristitia Christi (translated and edited by Clarence H. Miller, CW 14), focuses on events following the Last Supper and reads in part rather like a detective story, replete with dramatic irony (e.g., "how was it that none of His pursuers recognized Him when he came up close to them..." (p. 419f); apparently autobiographical reflections ("...wield with vigor the sword of the word, whose stroke, like that of a scalpel, lets pus out and heals by wounding" (p. 479); and a *very long* concluding section (pp. 565-587) [folios 140^v -146 in the Valencia, Spain, holograph manuscript], in which More bravely attempts to uncover the identity of a certain young man who followed Christ into the Garden, "having only a linen cloth wrapped about his naked body, and throwing it off, he fled from them naked." [Mk 14:51-52]. More disputes traditional belief that the youth was the evangelist St. John, and/or a favorite of Christ, but holds it was, rather, "one of

the servants in the household where Christ had celebrated the Passover that night" who followed Him to the Garden at a distance. "Furthermore, when all the apostles had escaped in terror from the hands of the sluggish soldiers this young man dared to remain behind, with all the more confidence because he knew that no one as yet was aware of the love he felt for Christ" (p. 579f). Was this St. Thomas More's last "story," written (perhaps subconsciously) to put his mind off possible hanging, disembowelment and quartering, a fate worse than that his Saviour suffered? Whatever, *The Sadness of Christ* is an extraordinary work, the excellent, readable translation of it by Professor Miller an enormous contribution to our appreciation of St. Thomas More.

107. "Three Farewells" (1)

[From *Letter to Margaret Roper* (April-May, 1534); *Works* , pp. 1430b-1431a]

Mine own good daughter, our Lord be thanked I am in good health of body, and in good quiet of mind, and of worldly things I no more desire than I have. I beseech Him make you all merry in the hope of heaven. And such things as I somewhat longed to talk with you all concerning the world to come, our Lord put them into your minds, as I trust He doth and better too by His holy spirit, who bless you and preserve you all. Written with a coal by your tender loving father, who in his poor prayers forgetteth none of you all, nor your babes, nor your nurses, nor your good husbands nor your good husbands' shrewd wives, nor your father's shrewd wife, neither; nor our other friends.

And thus, fare ye heartily well, for lack of paper.

Thomas More, Knight

Our Lord keep me continually true, faithful, and plain; to the contrary whereof I beseech him heartily never to suffer me live. For as for long life (as I have often told thee, Meg) I neither look for nor long for, but am well content to go, if God call me hence tomorrow. And I thank our Lord I know no person living that I would had one fillip for my sake: of which mind I am more glad than of all the world beside.

Recommend me to your shrewd Will, and mine other sons; and to John Harris, my friend, and yourself knoweth to whom else; and to my shrewd wife, above all. And God preserve you all and make and keep you His servants all.

"Three Farewells" (2)

From [*Letter to Margaret Roper* (1534); *Works* , p. 1448a]

And I thank our Lord, Meg, since I am come hither, I set by death every day less than other. For though a man leese of his years in this world, it is more than manifold recompensed by coming the sooner to heaven. And though it be a pain to die while a man is in health, yet see I very few that in sickness die with ease. And finally, very sure am I that whensoever the time shall come, that may hap to come God wot how soon in which I should lie sick in my death bed by nature, I

shall then think that God had done much for me, if He had suffered me to die before by the color of such an awe. And therefore my reason sheweth me, Margaret, that it were great folly for me to be sorry to come to that death which I would after wish that I had died.

"Three Farewells" (3)

[From *Letter to Margaret Roper* (July 5, 1535); *Works* , pp. 1457b-1458]

Our Lord bless you, good daughter, and your good husband, and your little boy, and all yours, and all my children, and all my god-children and all our friends. Recommend me when ye may to my good daughter Cecily, whom I beseech Our Lord to comfort; and I send her my blessing and to all her children, and pray her to pray for me. I send her a handkercher, and God comfort my good son, her husband. My good daughter Daunce hath the picture in parchment that you delivered me from my Lady Conyers, her name is on the back. Show her that I heartily pray her that you may send it in my name to her again, for a token from me to pray for me.

I like special well Dorothy Colly. I pray you be good unto her. I would wit whether this be she that you wrote me of. If not, yet I pray you be good to the other as you may in her affliction, and to my good daughter Joan Aleyn, too. Give her, I pray you, some kind answer, for she sued hither to me this day to pray you be good to her.

I cumber you, good Margaret, much, but I would be sorry if it should be any longer than tomorrow, for it is St. Thomas's eve, and the utas of St Peter; and, therefore, tomorrow long I to go to God. It were a day very meet and convenient for me.

I never liked your manner towards me better than when you kissed me last, for I love when daughterly love and dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy. Farewell, my dear child, and pray for me, and I shall for you and all your friends, that we may merrily meet in heaven. I thank you for your great cost.

I send now unto my good daughter Clement her algorism stone, and I send her and my good son and all hers God's blessing and mine. I pray you at time convenient recommend me to my good son John More. I liked well his natural fashion. Our Lord bless him and his good wife, my loving daughter, to whom I pray him to be good, as he hath great cause: and that, if the land of mine come to his hands, he break not my will concerning his sister Daunce. And the Lord bless Thomas and Austin, and all that they shall have.

NOTES

(1) **for lack of paper** : More apparently was given an extra sheet of paper in order to continue his letter to Margaret. In this letter, written not long before he died, More refutes for the last time the accusations that he was cruel and vindictive (see No. 85, p. 335).

(2) **shrewd Will** : i.e., William Roper, his son-in-law. The epithet is a playful reference to

Roper's sometimes recalcitrant manner. He had, for example, professed Lutheran persuasion even while residing in More's home near the Stock Market on Bucklesbury. He lived with the More family from about 1518, when he entered Lincoln's Inn, until July, 1521, when he married Margaret More, who was twelve years younger than William. The epithet "Shrewd Will" was made proverbial by More's kinsman, John Heywood, in his collection of proverbs (1546): "Will is a good son, and will is a shrewd boy ? And willful shrewd Will hath wrought thee this toy," that is, a mischievous will has brought about unpleasant circumstances (ed., R. Habenicht, ll. 877f). Thomas Whythorne, Heywood's amanuensis, comments on his master's frequent use of this proverb in conversation with him when he was employed at his home in London: "When I dwelled with mine old master Mr. Heywood, I do remember that I did hear him say many times that Will was a good son, and Will was a shrewd boy..." (Bodleian Ms. Misc. C. 330, f. 12).

(3) **mine other sons** : i.e., William Daunce and Giles Heron, More's sons-in-law, and John More, who married Anne Cressacre. **John Harris** : i.e., More's personal secretary and tutor of Greek and Latin to his children. He married Dorothy Colly, Margaret Roper's maid; **your little boy** : i.e., Thomas, Margaret's eldest son, born in 1534; **daughter Cecily More** : Cecily More married Giles Heron on September 29, 1525, the same day on which her sister, Elizabeth, married William Daunce; **daughter Daunce** : i.e., Elisabeth More, who married William Daunce; Lady Conyers can not be identified.

(4) **Dorothy Colly** , Margaret Roper's maid, was wife to John Harris, More's secretary. She often carried Margaret's gifts to her father when he was in the Tower, and she gave information on More's death to Thomas Stapleton, who included it in his biography of him (*Tres Thomae* , 1588); **Jane Alleyn** was one of Margaret Roper's maids.

(5) **St. Thomas eve** : More was executed on the day before the celebration of the translation of the relics of St. Thomas à Becket of Canterbury before nine o'clock in the morning, not in the evening.

(6) **daughter Clement** : i.e., Margaret Giggs (or Gige), apparently an orphan and a relative of More's family, who lived with More and who married Dr. John Clement, a tutor in More's household, later physician. Margaret Gigs was singularly learned, and in her old age gave details of Sir Thomas More to Thomas Stapleton, one of More's early biographers; **Thomas and Austin** : i.e., More's grandchildren, the children of John More and Anne Cressacre.

(7) **algorism stone** : i.e., probably a slate used for arithmetic, etc., needed when More had few writing materials in prison (*Rogers* , p. 564, n. 28).

¹ *Hoved aloof* : held back, shown no sympathy

² In the midst of

³ Convicted, condemned

⁴ Tight-fitting

⁵ Weight

⁶ Withheld

⁷ Sharp blow

⁸ Lose

• *Utas of St. Peter* : I.e., the last day of the eight-day feast of St. Peter which began June 29.