

“Dear Friends In Christ”

DANIEL BERRIGAN, S.J.

When a good man dies, there is no mistaking the loss. We know it in our bones and in our flesh. We know it as if we had awakened one morning and, turning to rise, come upon a bandaged stump in place of a whole limb. We know our loss, as the price of being awake at all. We know it, when we have loved another, his voice and face and living thought; when death has left us only a photo upon a wall, and silence, and a life of secret grieving.

Indeed death does not always have the same sting. It comes easily to the old; it thins their blood to water; then like a midday sun, it draws them into the atmosphere, leaves the veins dry, like a vine cut down in autumn. We can understand the word of the King to Hamlet: “you must know, your father lost a father, that father lost, lost his . . .” But the death of the young is another matter: When it occurs in circumstances of injustice and brutality, it cleaves us to the bone; it challenges faith with manifest absurdity, it leaves us appalled and dismembered. How could such a thing occur? What is the meaning of this death? Or, indeed, does it have any meaning at all? And if the violent death of the young is meaningless, what are we to say of this absurd universe, of this absurd God? Our faith has accepted the fact of death, has made it at least remotely bearable. The word of God penetrates the appearance of death, blesses our hope of immortality, gently quiets our protest and rebellion. Those we love, it assures us, are not taken from us; their lives are changed for the better. A mystery breaks through the universal

fate of death, which the Greeks saw as iron necessity and the Romans softened with a gentle longing for immortality in the memory of man. The Christian word is both rigorous and merciful; it assures us that love of others is more than a temporal blessing, that we shall see again those whom we have loved in both flesh and spirit. “We shall all rise again.” To be man is to be immortal, as man.

The words of Paul to the Christians of Corinth imply a universal release from the slavery of death. His words profoundly alter not only our view of the afterlife but our view of the world, our understanding of what human community is, of what our duties of piety toward others are, of what the simple word “brother” means. But the word of God is one thing; our understanding of it is surely another. Awareness of our brother, a living awareness that accepts the price and task of reconciliation, does not come easily to men. Such an awareness dislocates our loyalties; it demands that one go beyond the blood, beyond the tribe, in order to come upon the will of God. Family loyalties, family professions, family status, family ethics, are placed in question. When the Gospel is in the air, all, all other loyalties are heard only with extreme reservation; for their summons is often intoxicating . . . and sometimes poisonous.

But the blood of Christ summons us to all men. When I have drunk His blood, I may not ever again question the blood which runs in the veins of other men; of men of color, of men who worship in another Church, of men whose blood runs violated in the streets. When the blood of Christ is upon

the altar, there is neither Greek nor Jew, freeman nor slave, male nor female standing about the altar. There is only one New Man, Jesus Christ, of whom we all are members, limb for limb. A universal bloodstream joins man to man, religion to religion, race to race, sex to sex. The family of man is once and for all created in Christ; a delicate web of life joins me to the race of man, in Him. The constricting curse of nationalism, tribal loyalties, racial frenzies, class injustices, is lifted; in Christ the call of the blood is heard at last for what it is, in the manifest intention of God. It is a call, as old as the blood of Abel, as young as the blood of Jonathan Daniels; it cries out from the earth, I am your brother.

We have all been moved to the heart by the death of this man. Unworthy of the blood of Christ, we are unworthy of the blood of such a brother. We cannot easily claim him, we come only reluctantly, and with a kind of dread, to the truth in which this man's sacrifice implicates us. It is not easy to be brother to such a man; our understanding depends in fact on the most electric and ironic change of heart.

How can we know *my* brother, Jonathan Daniels, without knowing as well all the brothers whom he recognized as his own? How far will this death stretch us upon the rack of the world? We are not merely celebrating a new friendship this afternoon, as though I, a Roman Catholic, had come suddenly to understand in the death of a Protestant, the presence of a brother. Jonathan Daniels did not win me so easily. Nor can I welcome him easily to my own heart. Indeed this young death has called me further than I had thought, or even wished. How could I have gained this man for friend, and not have gained you? How could I grasp the hand of the dead, without seeing that this hand was closed, with the rigor of its final choice, upon white hands and black, Jew and Catholic, the defeated and the persecutor, the Vietnamese, the Congolese, the Russian—all men, all intractable and stained and unworthy hands—even my own?

No, we celebrate something far more than a new friendship this day. The word of God tells us so. The word of God says that the death of this man is martyrdom, a drama, a crisis, a summons to change of heart, a death and resurrection, mysteriously joined to the destiny of Christ, and the destiny of all men; a death that sucks us into its vortex, its moment of truth, its bloodletting and cruel defeat, its terrifying call to conversion. The truth of such a death comes hard to us. We are unready for it; we are used to an easy faith: which is to say, to easy lives and easy death. We

expect faith to bless our somnolent hearts, to reduce our suffering, to prosper our blood line. But the Bible has another message for us; it calls us to an universal existence, to life in public, to responsibility for, and to, all men. And in order that a man may be a universal man, he must overcome the call of the blood and all it implies; its insularity and fear, its adoration of idols, its dread of life. The call is as old as the murder of Abel, the exodus of Abraham, the vocation of Moses, the call to the New Testament mission. The disciple must leave all things; he must leave father and mother and flocks and good repute and secure lodgings, and presuppositions and prejudice and false hope, and the cheap grace that flows tranquilly in the veins of the tribe. He must go out from himself; into exile or bondage or prison. And this is not all.

The New Testament summoning to faith may be a call to martyrdom. Blood will have blood, we are told; the Blood of Christ lays claim on the blood of man. All the idolatries and paganisms consecrated by the worship of blood, by the superiority of the blood, by the blood that visits the unthinking brain and the unconverted heart—all these are destroyed, the unholy fevers are stilled, the inhuman chill is warmed, when “a man lays down his life for his friend.”

A transfusion of blood. The blood of Jonathan Daniels, flowing in the dust of an obscure southern town, has joined the great stream of the blood of Christ, the blood of martyrs, the blood of good men. Despite the call of the blood, the call to clerical peace and clerical immunity, unexpected and undeserved like the blood of Christ, Jonathan Daniels is joined to the bloody witness of black man and white, of Jew and Gentile, of man and woman, crying out from beneath the throne of the Lamb “those who had been killed for the sake of the faithfulness of their witness.”

Such a witness indeed sternly forbids all other calls. Before the spectacle of the martyrs, their moral splendor, their incorruptible gift, heaven and earth stand transfixed. We know with the best part of us, which the blood of heroes has quickened, that martyrdom is neither to be explained nor explained away. Before the martyrs our conceits fall silent; our human expectations wither; the web of nature in which man had been ensnared, is torn asunder and the fact of martyrdom becomes a miraculous crossroads, a place crisis, a place of drama. No one can come upon it, and come away unchanged. The unbeliever is shaken by a mystery for which neither logic nor cynicism had prepared him; the believer is shaken from his paltry security, from a faith which had taken into account neither the omnipresence of tragedy nor the rigorous call for love

A martyrdom is a crossroads and a place of meeting; it is also a place of worship. We know that in the early church, men spontaneously set their altars up at the place where good men had died in witness. Where the blood of good men had run, the eucharist was celebrated, the blood of Christ was drunk. And in that place, men came to know their brother for the first time; slave and free, Jew and Gentile became one in Christ, drawn one to another by the blood that lay warm upon the altar. In such a way, the witness of blood is a supreme witness to human unity. It is a hard saying; our blood runs cold at the price exacted in order that the simplest of human recognitions may have place, that man may know his brother. But who is to instruct us in a better way?

Dear friends, in the geography of our land, the rivers of the South may yet flow north. It may be that the land has imperceptibly tipped, that the blood sacrifices of one hundred years shall now turn in our direction; to ease our moral impasse, to shed light upon our path. Our own blood flows tranquilly in our veins; its untroubled murmur, its childish complaints, the fear that lies in it like a biotic, the dread that sends us fleeing change, fleeing sacrifice, fleeing neighborhoods, fleeing our brothers—who can speak to this death? Indeed, a few have stood in the breach, have conquered

their dread, have put their bodies where their words were. In the letting of their blood, such men have been freed of the cowardice that plagues the blood of the living. And such men may yet help to free us of the imperfection to which life itself condemns us. Being white, we cannot be black; being Episcopal, we cannot be Catholic, being affluent, we cannot be poor. But when a man has given his blood, he has literally given everything; more, he has been transformed into his gift. So he becomes a universal man in the gift of his manhood. His blood has reached further, and cried out more truthfully, than ever his word could, so a gift that is normally postponed until the end of things, is brusquely placed in our hands. A man of the last day becomes the man of our day. We may now, if we will, take in our hands the life blood of Daniels where the gunshot released it. The living blood is offered to God, and to men, to transform our pusillanimity into heroism, our denseness into moral clarity, our dead words into prophetic speech, our inanity into faithful deeds. In this blood, may we take heart; may we take up with new heart the task of the living: one nation, one mankind, one Body of Christ.

This sermon was preached by Father Berrigan at the memorial service for Jonathan Daniels held at St. Andrew's Church, Yonkers, New York.