

**Sermon preached by Dom Tancred Ambrose Agius OSB  
at Radstock on February 5<sup>th</sup> 1923**

*“Being made perfect in a short space he fulfilled a long time; for his soul pleased God” . Wisdom: iv, 13*

Doubtless you are aware, my dear Brethren, that the arrangements for the erection of a Crucifix, outside this Church, in memory of my youngest brother who was killed in the War, are practically complete. Many of you have contributed towards this object. All of you, I hope, will understand the significance of this memorial set up in the sight of those that pass by, its significance not only as the record of the undying past, but also as an inspiration for your own present and future. And therefore I have thought it well that you should hear and preserve in your memory a few details about the last days of the one whom this Crucifix commemorates, so that his record may live not only in the effigy of his crucified Master, but also in your own lives and in the lives of your children, enshrined in many an act of self-sacrifice inspired by his example.

My brother was one of that vast number whose names and achievements were lost in the magnitude of the enterprise in which they were engaged, and remain known only to those about them, and to their intimate friends. It is true indeed that all through the period of the War our minds were filled and our hearts were stirred by the tale of heroic deeds of courage, of endurance, of chivalry; but those that were told were few only; the greater number will never be known. It was often mere accident that individual deeds were perceived and recorded. More often the deed was done in isolation, away from the applauding onlookers, and the memory of it perishes with the doer.

My tale tonight, however, is not so much one of stirring deeds, as the account of a soul, naturally shy, sensitive, retiring and deeply religious, shaping out its course anew amid the circumstances to which Duty and a fiery Patriotism led it.

When the War broke out my brother, who was still three months short of eighteen, was spending his last term at school. He was known there for his almost passionate energy in training his section of the Officers Training Corps and in the ensuing competition his House won the Cup. It was a presage of later days when the men of the company under his command used almost to complain of his unsparing devotion to duty. With him duty was not merely something to be done, to be got through; rather it was something almost sacramental, into the accomplishing of which he threw all his energies with an uncontrollable vehemence.

He was still too young, when he left school, for a Commission. But the time of waiting was not wasted. His three brothers had already, months before, responded to the great Call. And, he, the youngest felt that the call of duty beckoned him along the same road, and his immediate task was to prepare himself to fulfil it. Long before, he had purposed in his own mind (and had revealed it as his intention) to join the Religious Order which had watched over his own education. But he felt that God called him to another duty first, and the call was too clear to be postponed. Though nervous by nature, for years afraid even of the dark, yet he refused to shelter himself

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beneath his ultimate Vocation and remain safe under the shadow of the monastery. If he had, no one could have blamed him. But in his obedience to duty, self had not only second place, but rather no place at all.

Quickly the intervening months passed by. They were spent in drilling volunteers in plain clothes (for the Nation was slow in organising her resources) in the Park, and in digging trenches in the garden and working out operations at his desk. An incident of this period shows alike the enthusiasm of the young commander, and his loyalty to His Church and His school. As he passed through London one day at the head of his plain clothes platoon, he saw one of the youngest of the Downside monks, not yet a priest. There was no military reason for a salute, but the old Downside boy would not pass by without a recognition, and he was glad to be able to show externally the sincerity of his loyalty. "Eyes right" came the order, and the men carried out the salute, though they must have wondered at whom it was directed.

At last the Commission arrived and was received with a mingled enthusiasm and pride. It came as a clarion call reverberating through every fibre of his body and lifting every faculty up to the very topmost pitch of endeavour. To others, his relatives, it seemed as a warrant for separation, for danger, perhaps for disaster. But to him it came personally from His King with the Divine sanction behind it; it came as a responsibility put upon his shoulders because they were believed worthy and able to bear it; it came as a summons to personal endeavour in a Sacred Cause and no esquire aspiring to knighthood ever welcomed more his elevation to the coveted dignity.

Events moved quickly now. Christmas saw him on the high seas en route for Malta whence his two brothers had preceded him to France. There, in practise night operations, he still had to fight out the battle between his innate nervousness and the demands of his office; and quickly his zeal, his energy, his tenacity of purpose conquered and he became a more finely sensitised, vibrant leader than those who had no previous fears to overcome. Once he fell backwards in the darkness into a 14 foot trench, but he escaped with a temporary convalescence, and the stream of his life's history flowed on again in the same channel until its appointed end.

From Malta he went to Alexandria, and we hear of him trying, amid the busy confusion of disembarking, to secure a chaplain to hear the confessions of his Catholic men. Thence he passed up river to Khartoum and saw interesting things and met interesting people. An Australian Bishop was still there who had known the ill-fated General Gordon. And there were meetings of Native Arab chiefs, with the Sirdar, and local proofs of the antiquity and universality of the Catholic Church witnessed by the solemnities observed in keeping the Assumption of our Lady, a thousand and one things to be noted and reported upon. And all through there shine the love of home and the sense of elation born of the personal participation in a great Crusade.

Then came the famous and heroic though disastrous attempt to relieve Gallipoli by the diversion at Suvla Bay, and there from Egypt the London Territorials went. I want to recall one incident, quite typical and very instructive. You will remember hearing perhaps in the life of St Martin of Tours, that one day the Saint,

when still a soldier, met a beggar half-naked by the wayside. St Martin, having nothing else to bestow, lifted his military cloak, cut it into halves with his sword and gave one half to the beggar. Behold a parallel.

The trench, in which my brother's men were posted, ran down the side of a slight hill and across the valley. One night, not feeling very well, he lay in his dug-out in the trench. He awoke to a strange sound, struck a light, and saw a foot of water in the dug-out. As he watched, it rose steadily. Quickly he stepped out into the darkness. A tremendous thunderstorm was raging. Amid the blinding rain, he saw in the frequent flashes of lightning, water running down the trench at ten miles an hour, sweeping with it accoutrements, bodies, and wreckage of all kinds. He got his men on to the fire step. Then as shooting was impossible in that inferno, on to the parapet. There they sat, wet through, all night, seeing their Turkish enemies in similar plight across the few yards of No-man's Land. All night they sat there, unfed, unwarmed, exposed. One of my brother's men was elderly, a prey to rheumatism. Himself he had a waterproof coat, well lined and warm. Now it was essential for him to keep efficient, his men depended on it. But he did not hesitate. He gave up his coat. Next day the wind changed to North and frost set in. Numbed, but still vigilant the young officer organised the defences as best he might. At last they were relieved. But his feet were frozen and it was many days before he could walk again. St Martin gave half a cloak: but he gave all.

There followed some months of rest in hospital at Mudros. Then a spell in Egypt again, as enthusiastic and resourceful as ever, entertaining his fellow officers by his skill in conducting an imaginary attack by Arabs. Then broken health; and the summer months of 1916 at home. That August I spent with him at Painswick in Gloucestershire. We used to go out for long walks together. And ever he had his compass and field-glasses with him, studying the country, making calculations, perfecting his practical knowledge. No wonder it was said of him that he was "too keen for the men".

In the Autumn he returned to duty. That was the last I saw of him till June 13<sup>th</sup> of the next year when I met him in France. For some time his Division, the 58<sup>th</sup>, and mine, the 21<sup>st</sup>, had been within six miles of each other, unbeknown to me. Then I learned his whereabouts and set off to find him. Long I searched in vain; at last in despair of finding him I called on the nearest R.C. Padre. As we conversed a runner brought a message from my brother asking for a Chaplain for his men who were shortly going into an attack. I went with this guide and found not one brother but two. The R.C.s were paraded, received the Sacraments, and then we three spent together one of the happiest evenings of my life. Soon after there was the battle. Five days after our first meeting I returned to the Camp, not knowing if either of my brothers lived. I found both. One had not been in action, but had been missed by an unexploded shell by inches only. The other had been through a disastrous battle; of two companies himself and a young public school Boy just joined had been the only officers left, but he had taken charge of the situation and acquitted himself well, though the eye of authority was not there to observe it. Together we sat and read letters from home. And it was my privilege to give them Holy Communion before we parted.

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Once more I saw my brother, and once only. His regiment had moved out of the Line and were in rest a few miles back. Well I remember that pleasant country village, hidden in the trees, surrounded by fields freshly green as our men gathered in the hay in the evening sunlight. It seemed so calm, so peaceful, in such utter contrast to the discordant strife and sudden death we witnessed every day. Once or twice again I visited the village, but my brother had gone to a rest camp at Valery-sur-Somme and I saw him no more.

That Autumn began the Passchendaele battle and we were there. There was too much to do each day in that eventful and calamitous time to think of much else but after a while I noticed no reference to my brother in letters from home, and then came anxious enquiries, and I guessed what the reason was. It so happened that I had recently returned from sick leave (you may remember I visited this church about that time) and on October 26<sup>th</sup>, as I went as usual from battery to battery, a vast battle extending over miles, was in progress. Some German prisoners were coming back and a few hundred yards of ground had been won. It was on this day that my brother fell. Not till November 6<sup>th</sup> did I hear the news. On that day as I returned to Camp after a long day among the guns, my Captain met me at the gate. "Have you seen the news?" he said. I said "No", but I guessed. He hesitated, not knowing how to begin. "My brother?" I suggested. He nodded. "God rest his soul" he said, and raised his military cap and turned away. In the tent I found a copy of the Times. Heading the Casualty list was my brother's name.

Next day I found his regiment, not many miles away, and spoke with his brother officers and the only sergeant that had come back. There was little to tell. He had been very keen, as always. The ground was heavy and as he led his men on, with his face to the foe, a sniper's bullet had pierced his helmet and so he died. His body was never recovered. As a soldier he died, and his was a soldier's burial; keeping the field of honour he had tried, with his life, to win.

Some months after Peace had been signed I was looking over the letters of condolence my parents had received, and I found one of more vital interest than them all. It was the letter written by my brother before going into action for the last time. I had four brothers in the Army, and it was their habit, when they were about to go into battle to write a letter and leave it in safe hands in case they never returned. And I well remember an elder brother who was in the same Battalion as my youngest brother telling me of an incident shortly before the latter was killed. It was his own turn, he told me, to go into action. He had written his letter and given it to the younger brother to keep. He passed through the action unscathed. And as he came back with the rest of his men to their billets, my youngest brother had come out to meet them, and stood there waiting for them to come up, tearing into little pieces the letter he now happily required no longer. Soon afterwards the positions were reversed. It was the youngest brother's turn to write a letter to be kept till he should return to claim it before going on leave, for his leave was due. He never came. The letter was duly forwarded. I have it in my possession now. Afterwards, if you will, you shall see it. Now before I close, I want to quote from it one or two sentences that take away the sting from death.

First then, he went into action ready for death. "I was very fortunate" he writes on the Monday before that fatal Friday, writing amid the bustle of preparation for battle, (for "the news came very suddenly"), "I was very fortunate in being able to get to Mass & Holy Communion this morning". If you had known him you would be able to imagine what that meant to him. Perhaps you have heard it said, as it is often being said even by non-Catholics, that our Faith is a wonderful one to die in. Here is the echo of that same idea. "What a truly wonderful thing our religion is and how easy it makes things for us however hard and difficult they may be".

"Hard and difficult"? You will say to yourselves perhaps, that he felt the pang of leaving life at its very threshold, that he mourned for the many years that were not to be his. No. One regret he had at the thought of death and one only, very typical of him. He writes, "The one thing I am sorry for is that I haven't had much chance of showing how grateful I am to you all for what you have done for me. I shall never be able to make up for all, but can only hope you will take the wish for the deed". You see the utter unselfishness that rings through it all? If it be true that men die as they have lived, then their last words, in a time of great stress, are the truest index of their real character, you will see what a light that generous sentence throws over the preceding years.

Then too he strikes the note of Resignation, and strikes it with a firm hand. The letter begins "This is just a short note in case of anything happening. But whatever does happen it is all for the best and only what God wills for us". And again "I am going in putting all my trust in God and may He do what He wills. I will try and do my bit and take things as they come". You see in what brief, hurried sentences, dictated by the pressure of the moment, the supreme act of Resignation is couched. Do you remember another act of Resignation, amid the shadows of the Garden of Olives, "Yet not my will but Thine be done"? They have affinity, these two acts, have they not? For though the surrender in the one case was immeasurably greater than in the other, yet the act of will was the same in origin and extent; both gave all.

Finally another parallel. The letter ran "you must try to take things as they come as well. Tho' I know how very much harder it will be for you all" and again "Please don't be too upset if I do go as it really is all for the best ..... For myself I don't mind what happens .... Its far worse for you, but do try and minimize it as much as you can". "For myself I don't mind". Are you thinking I wonder, of those other immortal words "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and your children"? And again "Son, behold thy mother" and "Mother, behold thy son"?

There are other things in the letter also, a thought for the grandchildren his nephews and nieces for whom he had always shown a special affection. There is the indomitable pride in the tradition of the family with which the letter closes "I could go on writing for ever, but just remember how proud I am to do my bit and keep up the traditions of the family". But I have said enough. Do you wonder if, with such a letter in my possession, I look on him, not as untimely dead, but as crowned with immortality in the supreme moment of his achievement?