

Eliot Weekend

May 30, 2015

The weekend seminar held here in Broadstairs at the beginning of May on poems and plays of the famous modern poet, T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), was a great success. Eliot is a writer difficult to understand, because he insisted on making sense of the senseless modern world, but Dr David White's six lectures (in 36 hours!) inspired in his more than two dozen Catholic listeners a real interest in Eliot. He was chosen as subject of the literary seminar because he wrote part of his most famous poem, the *Waste Land*, in nearby Margate. A high point of the seminar was an excursion to the seaside pavilion where Eliot did the actual writing, and where Dr White recited the *Waste Land* to seminar participants in front of a grey sea, beneath a grey sky – the atmospherics were perfect!

Many Catholics object to writers who are not openly Catholic, however famous they may be. But in the mid-1920's, soon after writing the *Waste Land*, Eliot nearly became a Catholic, and from then on until his death the solution he presented in his writings for the modern world's problems centred around Our Lord Jesus Christ. This may not be obvious at first view, either because he was writing for lukewarm Christians, or because he was still himself wrestling with modernity, but let his real belief in Christ be illustrated by a poem from his *Four Quartets*, singled out by Dr White for explanation, section IV of the fourth quartet, "Little Gidding":—

1. The dove descending breaks the air
2. With flame of incandescent terror
3. Of which the tongues declare
4. The one discharge from sin and error.
5. The only hope, or else despair
6. Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
7. To be redeemed from fire by fire.

8. Who then devised the torment? Love.
9. Love is the unfamiliar Name
10. Behind the hands that wove
11. The intolerable shirt of flame
12. Which human power cannot remove.
13. We only live, only suspire
14. Consumed by either fire or fire.

During the Second World war, Eliot was living in London, and at night he acted as an Air Raid Warden, patrolling the streets to minimise the danger and damage of German air raids. The first of the poem's two verses is like those plastic double images which contain two pictures, depending on how you tilt the plastic. The second verse draws the tremendous lesson from the double image.

Thus 1) the "dove descending" is both the Holy Ghost descending at Pentecost and the enemy bombers coming down on London. 2) The "flame of terror" is both the fire of the Holy Ghost and the enemy's incendiary bombs. 3) The "tongues" are both those of the Holy Ghost on the heads of the Apostles and those of the fire-bombs, while 4) the "discharge" is both the Redemption by Christ and the releasing of the bombs by human politics. 5) The first of these is our only hope, the second is the hopelessness of war. 6) On which funeral pyre do we choose to burn? 7) The fire of Redemption is to save us from the fire of damnation.

Second verse: thus 8) it is God who designs World Wars to save us from eternal fire. 9) He is not well known, but it is 10) his Love which is allowing the politicians to cause 11) the torments of war, 12) which are redeemable by Christ alone. 13) In conclusion, human life ends only 14) in fire, either that of divine Love or that of eternal damnation.

The Third World War is coming. When it comes, how many Catholic preachers are there who will dare to preach that it is the divine Love which will have been behind its appalling

sufferings, no less being necessary in order to put us back, by God's design, on track to Heaven? The non-Catholic Eliot was saying it 70 years ago.

Kyrie eleison.