

Advent – the dark time of the year

In a poem dedicated to his deceased Irish mother, Seamus Heaney remembers simple things about her: *And don't be dropping your crumbs. Don't tilt your chair. / Don't reach. Don't point. Don't make noise while you stir.* He remembers, as a child, silently sitting with her over a bucket of water: *I was all hers as we peeled potatoes. / They broke the silence, let fall one by one . . . / Little pleasant splashes . . . / I remembered her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine, our fluent dripping knives - / Never closer the whole rest of our lives.*

He remembers the cool that came off the sheets just off the line and how he and she would stretch and fold them and end up hand to hand. And then there was Holy Week and *The midnight fire. The paschal candlestick. / Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next / To each other up there near the front / Of the packed church, we would follow the text . . . / As the hind longs for the streams, so my soul . . .* He remembers, too, (after he had become a famous poet) how she pretended bewilderment over his big words and the names he dropped until he learned to govern his tongue in front of her and lapse into the country dialect of his childhood.

Finally he remembers her death; how his father *In the last minutes . . . said more to her / Almost than in all their life together. / . . . His head was bent down to her propped-up head. / She could not hear but we were overjoyed. / He called her good and girl. Then she was dead, / The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned / And we all knew one thing by being there. / The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep, it penetrated / Clearances that suddenly stood open. / High cries were felled and a pure change happened.*

How similar a scene to my own experience by the bedside of my dying sister long ago! A vacancy is left and yet not a mere vacancy but a peculiar vacancy - a vacancy somewhat like that of Christ's empty tomb, a kind of post-partum vacancy suggesting that a birth rather than a death has occurred.

All of which brings us back to this dark time of the year to revive in us before a tree bright with color and fragile globes of crystal the thought that now - as the days grow dimmer, the leaves fall, the trees go bare, a chill fills the air and the fading year becomes a metaphor of human mortality – something wholesome, warm, alive persists and always will.

The Church obviously considers this a time to think about death: the death of loved ones and our own eventual demise - but with the mellow expectation that, even as winter gives way to springtime, death is but a prelude to our rebirth somewhere, somehow - where you and I shall have an opportunity to relate eternally to others (in my case to my sister) with an intimacy expressible - on this side of the grave - only in poetry such as Seamus Heaney wrote about his mother.