24th September 2024

Wrath

N'attendez pas le Jugement dernier. Il a lieu tous les jours.

"Do not wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day."

Albert Camus, *The Fall* (1956)

I'm troubled. I'm not bothered about being troubled. Things may resolve themselves, or they may not. What will be will be. But I'm still troubled.

Last month, at the Edinburgh International Festival, my wife and I attended a performance of Verdi's *Requiem,* with four amazing soloists, the Philharmonia Orchestra under the baton of the vibrant Santtu-Matias Rouvali, and the stunning singing of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus. Verdi's *Requiem* is more operatic than the majority of Requiems, and thus lends itself to a concert performance. It was wonderful. But I was left troubled – not by complex musicality or any flaws in the performance, but by the text.

The *Requiem* is, of course, the "Mass for the Dead", sung in Latin. After the opening section, *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine* ("Grant them eternal rest, O Lord") we are battered for the first time by the full force of the choral, *Dies Irae* – "The Day of Wrath". It's about terror, judgement, ashes and the vengeance of God. Scary stuff! But as if that isn't enough, the soprano, mezzo and tenor soloists then unfold the unworthiness of every poor soul who has to face their *Dies Irae,* offering what was for me is now the source of my troubled mind:

> *What shall I, a wretch, say then? Whom shall I ask to plead for me, when scarcely the righteous are safe?"*

"Scarcely the righteous are safe …"? What kind of God is this who causes even the best be fearful, consumed with terror that even *they* might not be safe? And what kind of Church is this which, over the centuries, in some of its manifestations, has pedalled a theology of a God who reigns by terror and wrath, a God in whom even the Saints cannot be assured of their safety? This is not my God. I am troubled by the image such language creates. If this is the God I have to fear, I will not subscribe to this theology.

So, in my troubles I choose, instead, to listen to Albert Camus, and *not* to the theology of a God of wrath. Last Judgement and a *Dies Irae*? Not for me, thank you, when I know that any judgement I have to face is now, as I'm measured against a God of Love – *every* day.

A prayer for today

Lord, help me with my continuous assessment, and not have me wait for a final exam. Amen

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