

Death-defying

Psalm 69:7-18; Romans 6:1b-11

The American statesman Benjamin Franklin is attributed with the saying: "*in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.*" I'm not sure which you'd thank me more for in a sermon, since the Bible does have much to say about money and taxes, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's". But there is certainly a lot more in the Bible about death, and that's where I'm heading this morning.

Since the beginning of the year I have been involved in twenty funerals, not far shy of one a week. Whilst that has been undoubtedly a heavy workload in terms of meeting with families, dealing with undertakers and others, writing up the service and then leading the funeral itself, I've always seen it as one of the privileges of parish ministry.

For all the sadness, hurt, anger sometimes, and bewilderment that occurs when death comes near, there has always been for me something incredibly powerful, and incredibly moving, in trying to shape and lead a service that not only gives someone a good send-off, but also says something hopeful and comforting to those left behind. Trying to find the words to say, and the words not to say, can be as rewarding as it is challenging.

Of course, the circumstances can be difficult. When tears come more readily than words. Or when difficult backgrounds and not much love needs to find appropriate expression too. Or where there's not much to say because a quiet soul lived a quiet life. Or when there's too much to say and people are disappointed when their association with the person who has died is not mentioned.

Whilst the reality of death has never been easy, our contemporary world where medical science has made much possible has meant people almost believe they can somehow stave off death and cling to life for as long as they want. Where people find themselves going willingly, or unwillingly, down roads where absolutely everything possible has to be done to keep someone alive, even if the life is not really what you would call living. In a world where many people see faith as irrelevant, and the promise of something beyond death unlikely, not only is death bleakly final, it has also become more difficult to handle.

In the Post-Enlightenment, Post-Modern, Post-Christian world there is for many discomfort with the logic, or illogic, of life after death and resurrection. I often wondered that since so many have gone beyond enlightenment, modernity, and Christianity, post everything, they are left comfortless, exposed, vulnerable, and terribly, terribly alone. What price autonomy, independence and freedom to be whatever we think we want to be when the reality shows the plain need for connection, mutuality, and, dare I say, faith in something more than just ourselves.

Death cannot be put off forever, it's a natural part of living. But Christians believe it is not the end.

Paul in his letter to the Romans tackles it head on.

"We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His...death no longer has dominion..."

I don't quite agree with the beginning of the poem by Henry Scott Holland, *"Death is nothing at all, it does not count..."* Death is something, it does count, but as the poem goes on to explain, it is a separation caused by moving into another room, and so long as the person who has died is not forgotten, they are still alive with us in our memory. I like that.

In Christian terms, might we think this is akin to the communion of saints, the sense that those who have gone ahead, moved from this life into whatever comes next, may not be physically with

us, but who they were, and the good that they stood for, is still alive in us. In what we say, in what we do.

We may not have got to the point in God's history that 'death is no more', but our faith in a life beyond is truly death-defying. Through the hurt and the tears and the grief and the loss, we may not turn the clock back, we do have to let go of the physicality of a loved one; but their essence, their true self, their goodness, the things that mattered about them, will always be with us so long as we remember them. Not preserving their memory in aspic; not creating shrines that try to fix them in one place for ever; but a living memory that allows them to move in and out of our hearts and minds. To make us smile, and sigh, and weep, and laugh with that silky remembering laugh; and be thankful.

What Paul with his idea of walking, "in the newness of life", and Jesus with His idea of heaven with its many rooms, drive at say that through our faith, we are called to live our best lives here and now, in the belief that death is not the end, but the continuation of the journey as we go from one existence to another.

That's not to minimize the pain, or the unfairness, or the shock, or even the horror that sometimes accompanies death. Nor is it to deny the need to grieve the loss. Not to get over it, but to become accustomed to it. But when we get to that point, sooner or later, when we are able to face a future 'without', and put those good memories into some sort of order, and be thankful for the life that was lived, and not be crushed by the earthly life that is no more, then I believe that it is our faith, tiny step by tiny step, that will get us there. Nobody says it will be easy. But it is possible. When we choose.

Then finding the positive words, and the kind words, and the good memories, will begin, slowly, to put things into some sort of order. We think about how they might be remembered. We might

even, and some do, think about how we ourselves might like to be remembered. Not in a mawkish or maudlin manner, but perhaps with a little wry smile.

Someone left me a book in my pigeon hole a few months ago, *Awful Ends, The British Museum Book of Epitaphs*. I don't know what they were trying to say to me...

I like the epitaph, allegedly from Aberdeen:

*Here be the bones of Elizabeth Charlotte,
Born a virgin, died a harlot.
She was aye a virgin at seventeen
A remarkable thing in Aberdeen.*

Or perhaps a little less saucy:

*Here lie I, Martin Elginbrod.
Have mercy on my soul, Lord God.
As I on you, were I Lord God
And you were Martin Elginbrod.*

Perhaps a real favourite is one written by Robert Louis Stevenson who in his short essay, *A Christmas Sermon*, reflects on questions of death, morality and humanity's main task in life. He concludes these are, *"To be honest, to be kind, to earn a little and to spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family happier for (your) presence."* He also wrote this startlingly good epitaph:

*"Here lies one who meant well, tried a little, failed much –
Surely that may be his epitaph, of which he need not be ashamed."*

The Christian faith has much to do with consolation and encouragement in the tough times of life. It's not a spiritual sticking plaster to put over the gaping wounds that are sometimes inflicted of us. Nor is it an elixir of Dutch courage that dulls pain for a time. It's more resilient than that and lasts longer. It helps us, with others, to face up to life at its worst, or most annoying, or most terrifying. It gives us the strength to soldier on and to persevere, because it speaks of a truth and a love that will not die. It is a crutch to lean upon when we're stumbling through life, and if that's what it takes to get us through and keep us going, then so be it. It is, in the end, death-defying in

those worst of moments, where we can, despite everything, see beyond the gloom, or pain, or fear, or death, that clouds life for a moment, but not forever.

Paul tells us that God's free gift is eternal life. Paul tells us that whatever our broken past, there is the promise of healing in the future. Paul tells us that whatever death-numbing fears we may have, death-defying faith in Jesus will open up doorways to new life.

After all the funerals I've had recently, and the two still ahead, I'm conscious that I may be preaching to myself this morning. But it just may be that someone here in Church or online today might need to hear this same message of hope, and encouragement, and promise too. And if that is you, may the death-defying offer of life and love from Jesus Christ comfort, support and embrace you today, and always.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen