

1 PETER 1.3-5: DEATH SHALL HAVE NO DOMINION - AFFIRMING THE HOPE OF RESURRECTION *Chelmsford 6 April 2008*

1. AND DEATH SHALL HAVE NO DOMINION?

This week *The Times* featured as its *Monday Poem* a poem on death by the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, each of whose stanzas begins with the words – *And death shall have no dominion*. Fine words, but as the poem develops these words have little substance.

*And death shall have no dominion
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not,
And death shall have no dominion*

Fine sounding words – but what do they mean? Precious little.
According to Frieda Hughes, who provided a commentary on the poem:

“The mad, in death, will be sane and the drowned will ‘rise again’ because in being dead we are also released from the shackles that bound us in life, be they physical or mental or the means of our death.

We cannot be caged by the moment of dying; in dying we are, in effect set free, even if oblivious. And when we are remembered by the living we transcend the oblivion of death, at least in the minds of those left behind. We are given immortality by the love of others”.

In other words – when you are dead, you are dead! Both for Dylan Thomas and for Frieda Hughes, death is the end – there is no hope of life beyond the grave. Sadly, what is true for Dylan Thomas and Frieda Hughes, is true for many people today.

As I was preparing this sermon I was reminded of a visit I paid last year to the graveyard attached to St Brelade’s Church, Jersey. I was in Jersey, for the simple reason that Caroline was involved in an inquest there. While she was listening to the unhappy details of a plane crash, I drove off in our hired car along the coast, and came to St Brelade’s Church. It was a beautiful sunny day, and after I had explored the church, I decided to explore its graveyard.

As I wandered around this particular Jersey cemetery it became clear that most of the recent graves lacked any Christian hope – even although they were to be found in a church grave-yard.

Since it was a beautiful day and I had nothing better to do, I decided to jot down a number of these inscriptions, with a view to making a sermon out of them.

The time for that sermon came this week!

So let me read to you some of the inscriptions:

'Love, laughter and compassion'. It's a wonderful tribute to a wife, but is that all her husband could say?

'Peace, perfect peace' read another inscription. Similarly *'Rest in peace darling'* marked the grave of a 'devoted husband'. A not too dissimilar gravestone for a husband and wife read: *"They lie resting here together"*. Although better than the plain *'RIP'*, do these do justice to the new life that will be ours? What about the joy of heaven?

The inscription *'May you peacefully walk with the wind at your backs and the sunshine on your face'* for the parents and their baby son is part of a lovely Celtic blessing. But it is a very self-centered view of life after death.

'He raged against the dying of the light' marked the grave of a son who had died at the age of 22. Understandable, but should that be the last word? On the other hand, I was not convinced that *'Thy will be done'* on the tomb of a child, who died at the age of three in 1875, was much better. Was it God's will that this child should be taken?

Then there were stones with inscriptions such as *'Always remembered'*; *'We do not die forever. We live on in the lives of those we love'*; and *'To live in hearts of those we leave behind is not to die'*. Yes, I hope that my loved ones will remember me – but there is nothing here about the life which awaits those who love God.

'Good night and God bless dear' was the message one husband wrote to his wife. Presumably this is what he had said every night to his beloved. But where is the hope of the glorious awakening?

More positive were the words *'Until we meet again: in memory of a dear husband'* – yes in heaven we shall be re-united with our loved ones who have died in Christ, but with so many others too!

Significantly, the Christian hope was on the whole restricted to graves a century or more old – although I did spot two exceptions: one dated from 1987 was *"Rev 21.3-4"* (but that presumes that people know their Bibles!); while the other dated from 1997 read *"In God's keeping"*. *'Until the day dawns and the shadows flee away'* (1894), was quite nice, but leaves a lot to be filled in.

The tombstone I most appreciated dated from 1876 *'In memory of Captain John Hamon, buried at sea, and of his widow and their five children: Rest in the Lord with a joyful hope of a glorious resurrection through Jesus Christ our Lord'*.

The fact is that for the Christian death is not the end. Death is not the gateway to oblivion – but rather the gateway to life; not a life which is a pale reflection of this life, but a life which will make this life a pale reflection of the next.

At this point let me introduce my text. In a world which was as devoid of hope as ours, the Apostle Peter wrote to some new Christians in Asia Minor: **"Let us give thanks to**

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope" (v3)

Yes, with the resurrection of Jesus **hope** was brought into the world
As a direct result of God raising Jesus from the dead, death is no longer the end - for the Christian death is but the gateway into a new and fuller life.

This was wonderfully good news to Peter's original readers in AD 63.

This too is *good news* for his readers in 2008.

For we live in a society where many fear death.

In a TV programme not so long two thirds of those interviewed said they feared death

Oh, we may well put on a brave front and try to accept death in all its bleakness.

But the truth is that most of us do not look forward to death.

We would dearly love to believe in life after death.

Yet, as the graveyard in Jersey makes clear, many people have actually no real hope of life after death.

In spite of Dylan Thomas' fine words, for many people death actually does have 'dominion' – death actually does have the last word.

But the good news is that with Jesus there is **hope**. For those of us who have put their trust in Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus from death "**fills us with a living hope**" (1.3)

2. THERE IS HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Whether a funeral entails a burial or cremation, there is always a point at which a minister says the words of committal – when we commit the body to be buried or cremated, "*confident of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ*"; or in the longer version of the latest Anglican pastoral resource:

*"We have entrusted **our brother/sister** to God's mercy, and we now commit **his/her body to the ground/to be cremated**: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body, who died, was buried, and rose again for us"*

But how "*confident*" can we be? We talk of the "*sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*" – but what makes this **hope** any different from any other hope?

It has been said: "*Probably nothing in the world arouses more false hope than the first fours of a diet*"

Is Christian hope any different? How can we be certain that this hope of life beyond the grave isn't just wishful thinking?

How can we be sure that what the Gospel promises is any more certain than the promises made by dieticians, by politicians, by second-hand car salesmen & the like?

We can be certain of the future, because of what has happened in the past.

Our hope of life to come is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Listen again to Peter: God "**gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope**". I.e. because of what God has done in the past in

raising Jesus, we can be certain of the future: we can be certain he will raise us too. Peter expresses his certainty in these terms

"We look forward to possessing the rich blessings (literally, *inheritance*, *kleronomia*) that God keeps for his people. He keeps them for you in heaven, where they cannot decay or spoil or fade away"

Peter uses three negative adjectives to describe that life which is ultimately beyond all description. He says that **the rich blessings** - the *inheritance* - which God has in store for us are

- ***imperishable*** - the blessings of the life to come **cannot decay** with age. My poor old teeth seem to be rotting away. However much I clean them, they still can't stand the ravages of time. But the life God has for us in Jesus will never decay, will never come to an end - it is ***imperishable***
- ***undefiled*** - the blessings of the life to come **cannot spoil**, i.e. they cannot be spoilt by sin. How this contrasts with your life and mine. For let's be honest, our lives have been spoilt, both by our own sinfulness and by the sinfulness of others. But the life God has for us in Jesus is perfection itself -
- ***unfading*** - the blessings of the life to come **cannot fade away** - they cannot be debased with the passing of time. What with inflation, any money we put on one side seems to have so little value. Years ago, a salary of £1000 was regarded as a small fortune, today it would be a mere pittance. But the life God offers us in Jesus will never lose its value.

In addition, Peter writes that **God keeps** these blessings of life to come. **"He keeps them for you in heaven"** - and because God keeps them, they are ***thief proof*** - nobody can take them away. People can tie us to the stake, throw us to the lions, gas us in a concentration camp, exterminate us with a bomb, or even gun us down from some safe house. But they cannot take away the life that God has for us..

What a hope! Here, amidst all life's uncertainties, is something which is certain. Death will not have dominion over us – for Jesus has destroyed the power of death.

3. THE FUTURE STARTS NOW

Faith in Jesus affects the future. But it also affects the present

I would mislead you, if I gave the impression that Christianity is simply about "*pie in the sky when you die*". It is also about experiencing life in the here and now.

Listen to Peter: **"He gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death"** - not "*he will give us*", but **"he gave us"**. Past tense.

Literally Peter writes: God **"has caused us to be born again"** (*anagennesas*).

The language is very similar to that used by Jesus in his encounter with Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader who came to see him secretly, at night. On that occasion Jesus said: **"No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again... A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again"** (John 3.3, 6-7).

Here, of course, we are dealing with a metaphor. Nobody is literally born again. And yet the underlying truth of this is that life radically changes - it changes because

already in the here and now we can experience something of Jesus' resurrection life. Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: "***Because Jesus was raised from the dead we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven - AND THE FUTURE STARTS NOW***"

I love that phrase: "***and the future starts now***"

So Peter goes on to write: "**You rejoice with a great and glorious joy, which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls**".

NB Peter uses here a present participle: he doesn't say, "*you will receive*", but rather "**you are receiving**". Salvation is already being worked out in the here and now

As a result, says Peter, **you rejoice with a great and glorious joy, which words cannot express** - "*you exult with a joy which is beyond description and which is shot through with that glory which belongs to God himself*" (JND Kelly)

Christians are by definition joyful people - or if they are not, then they have failed to grasp what Jesus can mean to them.

It was CS Lewis who said: "*Joy is the serious business of heaven*". Indeed CS Lewis entitled his autobiography: "***Surprised by Joy***".

Joy should be the hallmark of every Christian.

It is not that life all of a sudden becomes any easier - indeed, as far as Peter's readers were concerned, the reverse was the case - the sheer fact of being a Christian invited persecution.

No, the joy comes from knowing that

- our sins are forgiven - they can never return to haunt us
- God is our Father and is present with us through his Spirit
- (above all) Jesus is our Saviour and with him our future is forever secure.

4. THERE IS HOPE FOR ALLWHO BELIEVE

The good news is that this resurrection life is not the preserve of the few - it is open to all. It is open to all who put their faith in the Lord Jesus.

"You rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls, which is the purpose (NRSV: *outcome, telos*) of your faith in him".

I.e. when we put our trust in Jesus as our Saviour and our Lord, the inevitable result is that we experience salvation - new life which begins in the here and now and carries on beyond the grave. But that new life is dependent on your faith and mine - it is for those who reach out and receive the new life which God offers us in Jesus.

A mediaeval king gave his new court jester the fool's sceptre & told him to keep it until he met a bigger fool than himself. Years later the king lay dying & sent for the jester.

"*I'm going on a long journey*", he said.

"*Where are you going, and how will you travel?*" asked the jester.

"*I don't know*" replied the king.

"*Have you made any provision for the journey, your majesty?*"

"*No*", replied the king.

The jester handed the king his fool's sceptre: "*Then this belongs to you*".

