

Grave inscriptions

A reflection on what people put on headstones

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By Paul Beasley-Murray
Chair of Ministry Today

Just the other day I received an e-mail from a young man: "I was wondering if you would be kind enough to send me some (short) Bible verses which we could put on Mum's headstone? We are quite keen to have something short as Mum would have liked it. However, we are not quite sure what to suggest to Dad".

I wonder what Bible verses you would have suggested? I offered the following three: '*The Lord's my shepherd*' (Psalm 23 had been one of the readings at the service of thanksgiving); '*Nothing can separate us from God's love*' (these words from Romans 8 I had read at the committal); or '*Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*' (this quotation from 1 Corinthians 15.57 had accompanied the death announcement in *The Times*). Another Scripture verse which came to mind was: "*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases*" (Lamentations 3.22), but in fact I had not used those words in the funeral.

As I was reflecting on this e-mail, I was reminded of a visit I had paid a month or so ago to the graveyard attached to St Brelade's Church, Jersey. It had been a beautiful sunny day, and, as I wandered around, 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. I decided to jot down a number of these inscriptions, with a view to making a sermon out of them, perhaps along the lines of 'What do we Christians believe about life after death?' In case you too would like some sermon illustrations, let me reproduce my jottings:

'*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!

As I said earlier, 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 "*Revelation 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*'.

Here hopefully is grist for a sermon on All Saints Day!