

# Keep on Believing in God

## A funeral sermon

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Let's be honest: Elinor's death was and is a tragedy.

She was only in her early 60s. By rights she should have had many more years to live. But she didn't. She died on the afternoon of Friday 1<sup>st</sup> September.

Let's not puff around with all this sentimental nonsense that Elinor has simply slipped into another room. Death has taken her forcibly from our presence.

I remember on the night of her death saying to Paul that the Bible is quite realistic in its view about death. It describes death as "the last enemy", as "the king of terrors".

Death is a nasty business. In the words of the great Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung:

*"Death is indeed a piece of brutality. There is no sense in pretending otherwise. It is brutal not only as a physical event but far more so psychically: a human being is torn away from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death".*

And so we grieve. We grieve the loss of a loved one. We grieve the loss of a good friend. We grieve the loss of one who was special to so many people.

We have heard a good deal about Elinor in Marion's tribute

But there are other things we could mention. For example, after leaving school she joined the Foreign Office and, having signed the Official Secrets Act, she went to work at Cheltenham. To this day the family don't know what she did, because she refused to tell them. They used to tell her that they thought she probably just emptied the waste paper bins!

We could mention too the key role Elinor has been in the life of her family. Elinor was not just a loving wife and mother. She was the rock on which the whole family built its life. Even in recent years when she was dogged by ill-health, she continued to be a tower of strength to Paul and her boys. She will be much missed.

She will be much missed in our church. For through her pastoral interest and care, she became a friend of many. If I may single out just one area of church life, Elinor was one of the helpers at Victoria Club: whenever she was on duty, she would always ensure that she had a word with everyone. Yes, she will be much missed.

But there is one key aspect to Elinor's life, which makes all the difference to our grief today. Elinor was a woman of real Christian faith.

Brought up in a Brethren home, from an early age, in the words of the poem read to us by Robert, she 'put her hand into the hand of God', and over the years she continued to hold onto God's hand.

Yes, she had a strong faith in the Lord Jesus. And it is this strong faith in Jesus which makes all the difference. For, in the words of Jesus we quoted at the beginning of the service and which appear on our banners: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die" (John 11.25).

For the unbeliever, death is the end. As the curtains pull around the coffin at the crematorium it is literally curtains. There is nothing to hope for.

John Diamond, the agnostic Jewish journalist and Times columnist, shortly before he died wrote a book entitled: "*C: Because Cowards get Cancer too*". Although a witty account of his encounter with terminal cancer, it is pervaded by a sense of deep sadness.

The final sentence of his account is about the purchase of a dog: "A dog is a happy thing, and it will be happy for me for whatever time I've got left and as happy as things can be for the family when I am gone".

For him there was no hope of life beyond the grave.

How different John Diamond's funeral must have been from that of Roy Castle, the entertainer, trumpeter, and frequent Blue Peter guest. For Roy Castle was a Christian. When he died, his wife Fiona was able to say to her friends: "No flowers, no fuss..... just lots of joy".

For the believer, death is but the gateway to a new and fuller life. In the words of the Apostle Paul read earlier in the service: "Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised" (1 Corinthians 15.20).

Yes, Jesus through his death and resurrection has carved out a trail through the valley of the shadow of death, and we by faith may follow his foot-steps. This is why Paul and his sons in Elinor's death announcement in *The Times* went on to quote a later verse from 1 Cor 15: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15.28).

This is why Paul and his family asked us not to come dressed all in black, but for there to be colour too. To quote in a slightly amended form a poem by Gertrude Knevels:

*"Shall I wear mourning for my loved one dead,*

*I - a believer? Give me red.  
Or give me purple for the King  
At whose high court my love is visiting.  
Dress me in green for growth, for Life made new,  
For skies her dear feet walk, dress me in blue,  
In white for her white soul; robe me in gold  
For all the pride that her new rank shall hold.  
In earth's dim gardens blooms no hue too bright  
To dress me for my love who walks in light."*

This does not mean we do not miss our loved ones - this does not mean that we do not mourn the loss of our loved ones. In this respect I think Fiona Castle got it wrong: for when I quoted her earlier, I did not quote her in full. She actually said: "*No flowers, no fuss, no mourning, just lots of joy*".

There is a place for mourning, even at a Christian funeral.

I find it significant that on the very occasion when Jesus spoke of his being the resurrection and the life, Jesus wept for his friend Lazarus (John 11.35).

If Jesus could weep, then so too may we. But though we may weep for our loss, we need not weep for Elinor. She is safe in the Father's house. Death for us indeed 'gain' (Philippians 1.21).

One of the most moving books I have read in the last few years is entitled *23 Days: A Story of Love, Death and God*, by Francis Bridger, an Anglican minister and principal of a theological college, who tells the story of how his wife Renee was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and 23 days later his wife was dead. He then goes on to recount the devastating grief he experienced.

*"Grief has only one goal: to usurp your love's place. It wants to become your new companion, your new best friend. This is what it lusts after. But - and here's the real cruelty - it doesn't even attempt to play the seductress, enticing you into its presence with promises of consolation. No, it waits in hiding until it can steal up, knock you to the ground and stamp all over you as you writhe in agony. Then it delights in kicking the living hell out of you until your guts are bursting and you can take no more, leaving you a sobbing wreck crying out in desperation for your loved one to hold you in her arms and make everything right. But, of course, she can't. How I hate that bloody cancer"*.

Bridger experienced death in the raw. But it's not just a story of love and death, it is also a story of God. Bridger railed against God, and understandably so. It was all so unfair. And yet, in the midst of his despair he discovered that God had not abandoned him.

Let me read the final paragraph of his account:

*"In the midst of human emotions of the most overwhelming kind, it is possible to know God... He enfolds our emotions, however negative, in his love and deals gently with them. He does not leave us or forsake us, whatever our feelings might tell us. And he does not desert us because we express them honestly. As I have discovered, it is in the storm centre of confusion and pain that he meets us... He invites us to discover him there... It is an awesome and challenging thought."*

Paul, Robert and Geoffrey, I would not blame you for railing against God. There are no easy answers as to why God let Elinor die when she did - why did he not allow her even just a few more months of life? In the words of Minnie Louise Haskins: *"God hideth his intention"*.

But one thing I do know is that God loves us, and that there is nothing which can ever separate us from his love. So keep believing. Indeed, that is what Jesus said to his disciples. "Do not be worried and upset... Believe in God and believe also in me". Literally, "keep on believing in God, and keep on believing in me".

When we lose a loved one, we find ourselves treading a lengthy path of grief. You don't just get over your loss within a matter of days and weeks. It takes months, sometimes years. But to those who mourn Jesus says: *"Stop letting your hearts be in a turmoil. Keep on believing in God, keep on believing in me."* And you will find, as Francis Bridger found, and many others have found, that God is there. He is there for you.