

Three Funeral Addresses

Ministry Today Issue 48: March 2010

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Within a fortnight three key members of my church died. In the hope that readers of *Ministry Today* might find them helpful, I offer the following three outlines of the three addresses I prepared.

Death is Nothing at All

"I've packed my bags and am ready to go" said Pope John XXVI shortly before his death. Mary too was ready to go. She had thought about what she wanted for her funeral service. In particular she wanted us to read Henry Scott Holland's poem: "Death is nothing at all".

I was unhappy with Mary's choice of the poem, because it goes against the biblical description of death as the "king of terrors" (Job 18.14), and the "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15.26). However, I've discovered that Scott Holland was not describing how death actually is, but rather we wish it to be.

The poem comes from a sermon preached at St Paul's Cathedral on Sunday 15th May 1910, shortly after the death of King Edward VII. Entitled *King of Terrors*, Scott Holland's text was 1 John 3.2,3: "Beloved, we are God's children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is....." [NRSV]. He said:

"I suppose all of us hover between two ways of regarding death, which appear to be in hopeless contradiction with each other. First, there is the familiar and instinctive recoil from it as embodying the supreme and irrevocable disaster..... How often it smites, without discrimination, as if it had no law! It makes its horrible breach in our gladness with careless and inhuman disregard of us. ... Its shadow falls across our natural sunlight, and we are swept off into some black abyss.....So we cry in our angry protest, in our bitter anguish.....

But, then, there is another aspect altogether which death can wear for us. It is that which first comes down to us, perhaps, as we look down upon the quiet face, so cold and white, of one who has been very near and dear to us.... And what the face says to us in its sweet silence to us as a last message from the one whom we loved is: "*Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I, and you are you; whatever we were to each other, that, we still are. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way which you always used, put no difference in your tone, wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we shared together. Let my name ever be the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effect, without the trace of a shadow on it. Life means all that it*

ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well". So the face speaks. Surely while we speak there is a smile flitting over it; a smile as of gentle fun at the trick played us by seeming death. It is not death; nobody is dead.

Have we all felt like that now and again standing by the bed?... Alas! it will pass from us. The long, horrible silence that follows when we become aware of what we have lost out of our daily intercourse by the withdrawal of the immediate presence will cut its way into our souls. How black, how relentless, this total lack of tangible evidence for the certainty that we believe in! Once again the old terror will come down upon us.... What are the dead about? Where are they? How picture it? How speak of it? It is all blind, dismal, unutterable darkness.....

In one sense we know all that lies before us; and in another sense that we know nothing of it. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." [NRSV] Think that well over. We are now the children [lit. sons] of God. That we can know for certain..... And yet, and yet, "what we will be has not yet been revealed" [NRSV]. We can see nothing ahead. No hint reaches us to interpret it. How can we picture it? ... Death shuts fast the door. Beyond the darkness hides its impenetrable secret. Not a sound comes back! It is a fearful thing...to be changed we know not how..., to be ourselves for ever and ever under unimaginable conditions which no experience enables us to anticipate or forestall. Dreadful, the darkness, the silence of the unknown adventure..... We go out stripped of all that has made us intelligible to ourselves, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. Death, then, must retain its terror...., the terror of the unknown, the terror of loss, the terror of finality to what have been hitherto the movements of our very life"

We long for death to be nothing at all - but the reality is that we fear death. And yet the good news is that those who, like Mary, put their trust in the Lord Jesus need not fear death: death is but the gateway into God's eternal kingdom. For those who believe, death no longer has the last word (John 11.25). Jesus has carved a path through the valley of the shadow of death, and we by faith may follow him. As John wrote: "My dear friends, we are now God's children... We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is" (1 John 3.2 GNB).

The late Christopher Idle, found himself in a quandary when people asked him to include Henry Scott Holland's poem in a funeral service - for wrenched out of their context, the words are misleading. So he wrote the following piece of prose to offer to the bereaved as an alternative:

"Death is sometimes our enemy, sometimes our friend. As an enemy, it may shatter our lives, cut short our time, diminish our families and circle of friends. We do not often invite it to come, nor choose the time of its arrival. In this world

we do have enemies, the Scriptures says death is the last.

Yet for the Christian, even death has lost its sting; Christ has made it a friend in spite of itself. Its victory is empty; its triumph will soon pass; it cannot have the last word. But it may still become our helper; not only a milestone but a signpost. It may lead us back to God if we have wandered away, or towards him if we have often been distant.

Death is a time for listening. Listening to friends, reading their words, listening to memories, hearing their music, listening to God in the quiet of my heart.

Death is a time for speaking. Telling the joys, memories past, telling of hopes, partly fulfilled; telling of growing and travelling, learning and finding, laughter and tears, a time for talk and a time for stories.

Death is a time for silence. When the words fail, sitting alone or quiet with my friends, watching or waiting, thinking and looking, the silence of prayer.

Death is a time for loving. Love never fails, love to the end; love all who love me and those who do not; love to heal wounds, love to accept, love to build bridges, love to forgive and know I'm forgiven. Love that is from God; God who is love; God who has first loved me".

Mary knew she was dying, but she was able to face up to the challenge death posed. Mary didn't want to die - but she was not afraid to die. It is her faith, and of course the Lord Jesus himself, which makes all the difference to our service this afternoon. Mary has "slipped away", not into the next room, but into the presence of the Lord Jesus himself. In the words of the poem "all is well". And all will be well; for one day she and David, and indeed all God's people, will be reunited in that kingdom where "there will be no more death, no more grief crying or pain - for God will "have made all things new" (Revelation 21.4-5).

Three Great Affirmations of Faith (Romans 8.24-39)

1: "The Spirit comes to help us, weak as we are". God does not live in an ivory tower, remote from his people and remote from his people's cries. God through his Spirit comes alongside us in our weakness. The Spirit, whom Jesus described as 'the Helper' or Comforter, is there for us when we have no strength of our own. If the truth be told, the last weeks of Jean's life were marked by great weakness. Much of the time she felt sick - and was sick. She lacked energy - she just wanted to be in bed, shut her eyes, and sleep. It was not an easy time for Jean - nor was it easy for the family. Time and again I prayed that Jean might experience God's power in her weakness, that she might discover that God's grace is sufficient for our need. And thank God, she did. Jean did not find dying an easy process, but in the end she died in peace. God through his Spirit was there, helping her in her weakness, as she walked the lonely path through the valley of the shadow.

2: "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him". Paul does not say '*all things work for good*' - cancer is never part of God's perfect plan, although at least a slow-working cancer gives us time to say good-bye to friends

and loved ones; a violent death like heart-attack leaves no time for a good death. Paul says: "In all things God works for good". Even in the toughest of times, even when we are suffering from an incurable cancer, God is at work in the lives of those who love him. As we look back at the closing days of Jean's life, we can see God was at work then, making it possible for Jean to die in the local Hospice, surrounded by her family. The thought of ending up there initially terrified Jean - it was the last place she wanted to go. But what a blessing the hospice proved. To spend the last few days of her life wonderfully cared for, and surrounded by her family, was a gift from God.

3: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God". I find it significant that in Paul's long list of things which people of his day feared, death was placed first. The grimmest reality of life is that it must end in death. People's reactions to death today vary enormously. Some do their utmost to banish it from their minds; some make light of it as if it is of no account; some sentimentalize it, and try to make it a mere stepping stone to fuller life; some see it as the most depressing fact of the universe and because of it see no point in life itself. The Bible has a different view from all these. The Bible never makes light of death - it calls upon us to face it fully and squarely and let it give seriousness to our lives. Death is not natural, but is inextricably bound up with the fact of our sin and of God's judgement on it. It is not beautiful, but terrible - it is the "king of terrors", the "last enemy". But, the Bible also makes it clear that for those like Jean who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus, death is a defeated enemy. Nothing - not even death - can separate believers from their Lord.

The last time I saw Jean was within an hour after her death. She was lying there at peace - holding a small cross in her hands. My mind went to the words of the old hymn: 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling'. Today we have rightly talked of Jean as a woman of good works, but, grateful as we are for all that she did, what we celebrate today is her faith, from which all her good works came. Many years ago, she put her trust in the Lord Jesus. And when once we have put our hand in the hand of Jesus, he will never let us go. There is nothing which will ever separate. It is this which makes the difference to our mourning. Death, the great separator, has simply taken Jean into the nearer presence of her Lord, whom she loved and served for many years.

Psalm 23 - God is with us

The last time I saw Ken was less than a week before he died. I read to him Psalm 23, and then held his hand and prayed for him. I dare to believe that I prepared him for death.

In the churches' *Common Lectionary*, Psalm 23 is the Psalm for All Souls Day. It is a Psalm for the dying. In the familiar words of the AV: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me". There is the central affirmation of the Psalm: God is with us - we are never alone.

Recently I came across a story about a little boy, starting his first term at junior school. He was asked, along with all the other children, to speak for a few moments on 'What I want to be when I grow up'. The little boy said: "When I grow up, I'm going to be a lion

tamer - I'll have lots of scary lions who will roar when I get into the cage". Suddenly, overcome with the thought of what it might really be like to enter a cage of roaring lions, he added: "But of course, I'll have my mummy with me!" The big question in life is this: Is there anybody there? Is there a 'mummy' in the universe? Does it matter to anyone what happens to me? Does my life matter?

The psalmist declares 'Yes'. Life may be frightening, with its dark valleys, dangers, and death, but we are not alone. Look closely at the structure of Psalm 23, you'll discover that God's name only appears twice: once at the beginning and once at the end. The Psalm begins: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". The Psalm ends: "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever". And that's the good news - from the beginning to the end, we are never alone.

Shepherds in the ancient world were tough guys with a tough job, who lived with, cared for, and protected their sheep 24/7. What's more, they knew their sheep intimately - they even knew them by name. Yes, Jesus himself said that "the shepherd calls his own sheep by name... I am the good shepherd... I know my sheep" (John 10.3, 14-15). What a wonderful picture of God's loving care for us.

Ken was brought to our church as a young child, and for almost 75 years he worshipped here. Like the Psalmist, Ken developed a personal relationship with God. He didn't simply believe in God's love. He experienced God's love. With the Psalmist he could use the first person singular and say: "The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need". He knew that God was with him. And what a difference that makes to life. God does not promise that bad things will not happen to good people, but he does say that we will never have to face them alone. It was this which enabled Ken to face up to death. If the truth be told, Ken did not die an easy death. But, for the Christian, cancer does not have the last word. This afternoon we celebrate that the good shepherd has taken Ken home. 'And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever'. For some people the thought of heaven turns them off. Karl Marx argued that religion was the opium of the people, shielding them from the realities of this life. Well, you can't accuse the psalmist about not being interested in this life - many of the psalms are this-worldly, pleading with God for justice, for an end to oppression, hunger and poverty. Nor can you accuse Christians in general about not being interested in this life - Christians do an enormous amount of good in this world. But, and it is a big but, there comes a day when this life comes to an end. What then? The good news is that the good shepherd will lead his sheep home. God has led Ken home.

We began our service with the words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die" (John 11.25). Ken believed - he is safe in the Father's house. To quote the words of Jesus we read earlier in our service: "Do not be worried and upset. Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house" (John 14.1-2). How do we know that this is not wishful thinking? Because Jesus the good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, was raised on the third day. In the words of CS Lewis: "*Christ has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of death. Everything is different because he has done so*". In this faith Ken lived, and in this faith Ken died.

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