

Facing Death

Sermon for Trinity1 Chester Cathedral 6.6.10 Luke 7: 11-17

I want to tell you about my friend Maggie. Maggie died 9 years ago after a long battle with ME and then ovarian cancer. She was 44. Maggie wanted to be buried in her native Suffolk and I remember very clearly standing by the grave just after we had committed her and a youngish man among the funeral party coming up and saying to me, 'We should be celebrating because she's got to heaven before us.' I have to say my thoughts were not charitable towards this young man. Standing at Maggie's graveside were her 80 year old father and 102 year old grandmother- both grief stricken. Celebrate??

What I want to say this morning has not been prompted by the terrible events in Cumbria this past week. It is not a comment on that tragedy nor on violent and random death elsewhere which we hear about so often through the media. I want to talk about death as it affects us personally, death as part of what it means to be human. It seems to me that in our modern world we have become estranged from death as a normal part of life. We don't know how to deal with it and it has become perhaps our last taboo. Huge resources are devoted to prolonging life and outwitting death. We now die when medicine has failed us and the doctors can do no more.

And when that happens we talk about someone having 'passed away' - a euphemism to protect us from the truth?- and funerals often concentrate on celebrating the person's life- an uneasy celebration maybe, but certainly easier than an open acknowledgement of the reality of death which will come to us all, and from the grief and rage at the dying of the light.

This is a delicate subject and it is important to be clear. I am not saying one should not celebrate a life- of course we should- and be thankful for all that the loved one has given us, but not at the expense of the open expression of grief and the profound sense of loss. Desperate grief does not imply lack of faith. The trauma of bereavement is real and should not be denied. Jesus himself grieved openly and honestly, at the death of Lazarus, and responds with such compassion to the grief of the widow of Nain. A culture which does not encourage the expression of grief, and no longer has profound common rituals binding us together, which does not know how to talk about death, is in denial. Denial about death –especially our own- is not healthy; we need to be able to talk about it and to share our hopes and our fears.

But talking about death quickly brings us to the subject of life. What does it mean to be alive- what is life about? Most of us, I guess might answer that question with words like 'loving', 'caring', contributing, doing something

worthwhile, fulfilling potential, offering our own unique gifts. But life is also about recognising our limitations- we are not here forever, and would we really want to be? If human life went on for ever- if we were immortal- there would be no meaning in risking one's life for love of another; no room for heroic sacrifice. Living would become sterile if we were guaranteed to go on regardless. It is our limitations- especially the limitation that we shall all die- that give meaning to what we are and what we value.

We instinctively offer protection and care to our babies- there would be no point if they were invulnerable. Our fragility, our vulnerability, are precious aspects of our humanity- God –given and allowing us to share in God's own nature- who came to us as a vulnerable baby- seeking to show us that power has nothing to do with a Jim'll fix-it mentality – the power of the creator of everything is wholly and only in an inexhaustible capacity to love. It is that love that sustains everything in being, that gives life meaning and flows out in compassion where there is suffering and grief. And so to entertain a science fiction fantasy of never-ending life is a denial of the richness of human living- in which we can learn a little about what loving really means – and its costliness- and be taken literally out of ourselves by encountering joy and beauty in the world around us and the remarkable qualities in other human beings.

In today's gospel Jesus reveals all the compassion of God's love when he responds to the defenceless widow's loss of her only source of protection by raising her son from the dead. Strictly this is not a resurrection but a resuscitation – the young man will die again, just as Lazarus has to. But it is a profound sign pointing us to the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection – and it denies that death equals defeat, or that our limitations are forever. The power of God's love is greater than human dying- including all the small dyings that happen to us throughout our lives- growing up and no longer having the protection of parents, the enforced acceptance of changes in our lives, in our churches, broken relationships, the loss of friends, and our most dearly loved ones the increased dependence of old age...all the little 'lettings go' that are inevitable in any life.

Resurrection is a mystery, beyond factual explanation. Again we can see glimpses in our daily living- the small resurrections which follow our daily dyings- our recovery from set-back, our refusals to be defeated – our greater self-understanding after some failure, the forgiveness which opens up a situation. But these do not really prepare us fully for the brutal fact of our own ceasing to exist as we know it. Our spiritual journey leads us into the unknown. When we are young we are confident in our certainties- the older we get the less black and white everything becomes, only shades of grey. This journey from certainty to uncertainty is a spiritual one- a profound letting go, but it

can bring with it a fear which very easily takes over and prevents acceptance not just of death but of a process which is a creative part of what it means to be human.

I am very conscious of the question once posed to me 'What can you say with integrity to someone who is dying?' Platitudes are unacceptable- it is better to remain silent. Yet too often I think we collude in pretending that someone is not dying- we have been contaminated by society's inability to see death as other than a feared enemy. We no longer seem to have a language to frame our hopes our fears, our faith. I can only say that in the darkest experiences in my life I have been conscious of a presence, sustaining, being alongside- not taking away the pain but being with me in it. To me that is sufficient evidence of the God of all love and compassion who will not let us go into oblivion.

I want Maggie to have the last word today. 44 was no age to die; it felt like an outrage. Maggie did not want to die- she had had a very difficult life- and much disappointment- but life still held out so much hope and possibility for her and she spoke to me of her sadness of what she would miss out on. Yet she was a woman of great faith and she took the process of her dying seriously- we had many conversations about it- and the night before she died she told me that she now understood the words from Ps 84 'a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.'

I believe and trust with all my heart that that is so.

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