

Mere Commemoration Sermon
St Benets Church Cambridge
April 22 2014

The readiness is all

Amongst the themes to be addressed in the sermons endowed in John Mere's memory was 'an exhortation to the daily preparation for death, and not to fear death otherwise than scripture doth allow'. It was recognised that this commemoration sermon would always be preached in the Paschal season - specifically on the Tuesday (or Wednesday) after Easter, which gives us the clue that, for Christians, at least, preparing for death and the recognition of our mortality has to be done both in the shadow of the cross and in the dawn of Easter Day.

Priests talk about death a lot. They help those who are facing death to die and they help those who remain to go on living. The imagery of death and resurrection accompanies our baptismal rites when the family is gathering for a less solemn occasion. Presiding over all is the figure of a crucified man. Death and its vocabulary are part of our religious discourse.

And so it should be. Religions go on attending to this most intractable of human limitations. When every other human resource or discipline runs out, religion goes on suggesting a way through. Some call it wishful thinking and flying in the face of the evidence. But the potency of religion resides very much in its ability to articulate a sense of eternity or the beyond – a nirvana or a heaven.

Much of what Christians believe about death and beyond death (priests included) is often very muddled. No doubt what I have to say this morning on the subject will also be regarded as such. But a priest who is a pastor as well as a preacher cannot escape – nor would wish to escape – the encounter with those who are dying or bereaved. Some of the most humbling and inspiring of a priest's experience will have been in such contexts. Maybe a priest can help a dying person grasp life more deeply and vividly even while life is ebbing away. But very often it's the other way round – the dying person provides the depth and the vitality. I have spent the last few weeks visiting my next door neighbour for whom the doctors, having done so much can do no more. Thanks to the advances in palliative care she can be cared for at home by her family, her pain can be managed even if her cancer can no longer be attenuated, and her mind and her conversational skills - not to say her garrulity - remained as sparkling as ever. The priest can anoint her, give her communion, say prayers with her and her family - for she accepts she is dying and wonders why dying should take such an unconscionable time. But to visit her has been more a tonic for the visitor than the visited - for she imparted a sense of life's meaning, purpose and adventure even as life slipped from her grasp - as it did just before Easter.

Because of our own bewilderment in the face of death (priests are only human, after all) we often resort to cliché and the well rehearsed platitude. Often we use familiar phrases that come out a bit pat and sound quite hollow to us as we say them. Sometimes we resort to sentimentality and 'that strangely comforting but theologically suspect' piece by Henry Scott-Holland.

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 are still. Call me by my old familiar name; speak to me in the easy way you always used. Life means all that it ever meant; It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute unbroken continuity. What is death but a negligible accident? 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.

Jesus would not have said 'death is nothing at all' for he had the marks of his own imprinted for ever, for all to see on his hands and feet and side. And although there is that extraordinary continuity in the Gospels, particularly in John's Gospel, between pre-resurrection and post-resurrection life, Jesus would not have said, I think, 'life means all that it ever meant, it is the same as it ever was, there is absolutely unbroken continuity'. He wouldn't have said that because something quite clearly happened on Easter Day that in the course of the following fifty days transformed the cowering, frightened, cowardly, inarticulate bunch of men and women into the vibrant, empowered, unafraid group that became – on Pentecost – the seed corn of the Church.

What changed them was the recognition that the resurrection was more than a particular historical event – it was an abiding truth about God. Eucharistic Prayer B in the Church of England's Common Worship, uses the interesting phrase 'Jesus revealed the resurrection by rising to new life' which is to say Jesus' rising on Easter Day drew attention in the most emphatic way to a divine reality, something that was always true. God was transforming the world: always had been transforming the world: and is still transforming the world and us: redeeming us and our world today by love and for love into his likeness. And the Resurrection (like the Incarnation) was the most vivid embodiment of that truth.

If that sense of transformation, focused in the dying and rising of Jesus, is the heart of the Easter proclamation, and the source of the hope that our death can be embraced with confidence and even joy, what are the steps we need to take to prepare ourselves spiritually for our inevitable demise. Hamlet, you will remember spends the course of the play surrounded by death, encompassing the death of others, and reflecting on his own mortality. He offers this advice:

If it be now, 'tis not to come, if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.

The readiness is all. But how in response to John Mere's requirement do we make ourselves ready? We sensibly make our wills, we sort out our life insurance, we consider the legacy that will enable our work and our achievements to be continued, we may even leave instructions about the form of our funeral service, and our final resting place. But how in spiritual as well as pragmatic ways do we take stock of our mortality and prepare for our demise?

The liturgy of the church of course provides us with moments of reflection on our mortality, and these are serious but not necessarily sombre moments - indeed Easter is one such season of life - and - death reflection, and our mood is celebratory and full of hope. The mood is different for example on Ash Wednesday when our foreheads are daubed with ash and we hear the words, 'Remember that you are dust and unto dust you will return'. Or All Souls Day in November when we are invited to consider our death but usually at a distance from the emotion and sense of loss that inevitably arises at a funeral. A preacher will often find that his or her understanding of death, and how we might prepare for it, is spelled out in the homily at such a service, in a way that one hopes not only clarifies or deepens one's own thinking but also is resourceful to others. One All Souls Day sermon of mine tried to relate our sense of our own mortality to the promise of resurrection - and I guess that John Mere would have thought such an attempt entirely appropriate and germane to the business that preoccupies us today.

All of us come here not only to remember, not only to feel the prayerful companionship of others – though these are important ways of confronting and comforting our grief. But we come here to remember our mortality – that we are, as that word suggests, - literally bearers of death. And as we consider the one thing of which we can be certain, namely that we shall all die, we come here to hear again, in one form or another, the words that confront the certainty of our dissolution: “I am the resurrection and I am life: whoever believes in me shall never die”. We come back to the scriptures and to our churches to hear those words, not because we hope thereby to escape the reality of death, or deny its potent finality. Christians are not, as the sceptics suppose, wishful thinkers, or deniers of the real world. If we were, we would not have as our emblem the symbol of death – namely the cross. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the story of a man who died; and of a man who died believing in the power of God to confront, redeem and transform that most intractable of human limitations, namely death. We come here to hear again the words of Jesus: “I am the resurrection and I am life” because they suggest to us something that we have already experienced in our own lives, long before we get to the point of death. I’m not talking about the cycle of renewal as the seasons pass and the leaves of Autumn suggest the dying of the year until the sun warms the earth again and rain causes the new growth of Spring that blossoms into Summer. That is not death and resurrection, though the seasons do provide us with ample metaphors for our spiritual exploration of these themes.

Death and resurrection are supernatural events, which speak of another dimension beyond the natural entropy – the dissolution and decay – of our physical bodies. And that experience of death and resurrection is known by us in our lives: moments when despite the grief, or trauma or disappointment or pain of life – as a marriage breaks up, or we watch beside a dear one whose life is ebbing away, or a long-cherished goal is denied us, or we are caught out in some shameful act that fractures the trust of others – we have experienced, and we can experience again, moments of grace and transformation and redemption; when despite the hurt, we find that life has opened up in new, unexpected and undeserved ways.

Those moments of grace are moments of resurrection. And that is why we come to hear the words: “I am the resurrection and I am life”, because although extraordinary, mysterious, and beyond rational explanation, they already tally with our experience of life. Just as eternity is not far from our worldly concerns, so resurrection is not far from our daily living. It is simply that death brings thoughts of eternity and resurrection into sharper focus.

Often on these occasions when we consider our mortality, and despite the wealth of personal experience we can all bring to that consideration, we often rely on the words of others, or the music or the art of those who more readily, and sometimes more effectively, flesh out our thoughts. Priests often fall back on the words of John Donne, or rather Dean Milner-White’s pleasing prayer which he constructed out of a John Donne sermon. You know the one I mean:

“Bring us O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling but one equal light, no noise nor silence but one equal music, no fears nor hopes but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings but one equal eternity, in the habitations of thy majesty and thy glory, world without end.”

Treat that prayer too literally and not as a piece of poetry and you will say – if that is heaven, it’s not for me: too bland, too boring. But of course John Donne is painting a view of heaven in the style of Isaiah. For the prophet paints a picture of the valleys being exalted and the mountains and hills made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain. You may say again what a desert place he has created: as Noel Coward commented when asked: “How was Norfolk?” “Very flat, Norfolk”. But the image from Isaiah is not one of flatness but of anticipation. As though the slate has been rubbed clean and the landscape is prepared for new planting, new ploughing, new harvesting, in the new heaven and the new earth. And

equally, John Donne's "equal music" is not a brand of saccharine sweetness with no dissonance or interest but a preparation for the new music of eternity.

It's a theme John Donne takes up in a famous poem called "A Hymn to God in my sickness", when Donne was himself considering his mortality and his own death. The poem begins thus:

*"Since I am coming to that holy room,
Where with thy quire of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music: as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I do then, think here before."*

Again any discourse about death, heaven and eternity is inevitably speculative and provisional, but John Donne's poetry endures like the words of Jesus because it rings true for many of us in our heart of hearts. What music we shall be made beyond our death we have no idea. But music always suggests a consort of people to make harmony. God, of course, will provide the music and the means to make it: but the music of heaven will not be entirely separated from our day-to-day music making – our mundane activity of our three score years and ten. Which is why Donne says that, as he comes towards death: "here at the door", he is going to tune his instrument. In other words get ready for heaven and what he will do by God's grace the other side of death; he's going to practice a bit now.

*"I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I do then, think here before."*

Sometimes, the questions that arise when we think about death confound and silence any pat theological response - and maybe silence is the only compassionate and caring response we can give - in the context of 300 passengers mainly children perishing in the South Korean sea, or ordinary men women and children caught up in the cross fire of civil war in Syria, or nearer at home when those close to us, or known to us, die before their natural term.

And we ask the questions, - why? what's the reason? what moral purpose is served by this or that tragedy? - not seeking simply technical explanations: the laws of aerodynamics which govern the velocity and mass and weight of objects. It isn't the answers offered by physics and biology that we want, (though at the level of our intellect such explanations may at least restore our faith in a rational rather than a random or capricious universe.) No, when we ask 'Why?' we seek answers of another kind which probe beyond the intellectual and the rational, to the spiritual and the metaphysical. Why are we here at all? Is there meaning and purpose to our lives? And the fact that we dare to ask 'Why?' at all suggests that we yearn for the answer to be 'Yes'. Yes, there is meaning and purpose to our lives despite the seeming futility, waste and injustice of it all.

Marian Smith, was a dear friend and a very fine musician. She and her husband Michael (who had been a cathedral organist,) retired to Bowerchalke, a lovely village in Wiltshire. It was there that the funeral took place. Marian died in the November, having been diagnosed with a virulent and inoperable cancer the previous August. It was while visiting her in hospital in Southampton while Michael and their three adult children were there, that some of the issues arose that people often think and sometimes ask. What's the point? Why is life so unfair? How can you believe in God if he allows such a waste? These questions can, of course, be answered in matter-of-fact, rational ways that do nothing to alleviate the anger, hurt and resentment that people naturally feel when a life is snatched away before its natural term. There is a Christian response to this sense of futility

and loss and I tried, no doubt inadequately, to express it to them during that hospital visit. And it was the family's questions that remained with me as I wrote the sermon I was to preach at the funeral. Preparing a sermon sometimes helps a preacher think about death and prepare for it. The hope is that others will be helped as well.

The sun is shining; it's a beautiful autumn day; there is music in what we do this afternoon, appropriately enough as we remember and give thanks for Marian, who was like the sun shining, bringing grace and beauty and music to her family and friends, her work and her creative achievements.

But for all the beauty and the sunshine and the music, we are left confused, possibly angry and resentful, and certainly perplexed that someone so young in heart, so full of life, so talented, could have been snatched away in just a few short months since the first signs of her illness. The question why? must lie behind the confident singing of the hymns and the saying of the prayers. Isn't there a mismatch between our unambiguous confidence in the God we worship and the sense of loss and grief and the fragility of life which we experience. What has the God we pray to got to do with the grief we feel? Are the prayers we utter worth the air we expend on them? Does he care? Why does he allow seemingly futile and wasteful suffering? What's the big plan? Is there a big plan? Or are the agnostics right - we are simply a random amalgam of atoms, constrained by physical laws tending towards decay and dissolution. And talk of plans and God only confuses the issue. We are simply left with the beauty of nature and art and human relationships to make sense of our brief lives.

I can't answer all these questions, and though much sweat and ink has been spent in pondering the imponderable, I don't believe there is a knockdown argument that would completely satisfy all our questions or heal our grief, or lead us through our confusion. I suppose I am content to go on mouthing prayers, and turn in sorrow and happiness towards the possibility of God. I suppose in the end I am a Christian not because my intellect has been persuaded by the latest argument, but because somewhere deep in me - my heart perhaps - something has warmed me. That something is akin to love - like human love but deeper and more enduring. I don't know why we suffer, why terrible things happen in our world - though I care about them and the mayhem they cause. And, in any case, knowing the reason wouldn't stop them happening. What I do feel confident about is that whatever pain or shame or grief or, finally, death I go through or any of us goes through - we do not go through it alone. I believe in that love, (let's call it,) deep in my heart, that is both personal and cosmic, that meets me and you day by day (if we care to receive it) and also sustains us through life and death and beyond it. Like the psalmist in the psalm the choir sang earlier, I cannot escape that love however hard I try, however confused I may be.

If I take the wings of the morning and alight in the uttermost parts of the west, even there shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me. (Psalm 139)

And the amazing thing is that sense of the enduring love that sustains you and me and all things in being beyond our own mortality is often conveyed to us precisely through the things that fade, through the beautiful but ephemeral things that enrich our lives and deepen them. Even while our prayers are tinged with disbelief, even while we are turning to God (if he exists at all) and asking why, we are being given the answer. We are given the answer through the person we celebrate today. When we remember Marian's smile, we are seeing God's human face. When we recall her beauty, we are being turned to a beauty beyond human beauty. When we give thanks for her skill as a pianist or her care as a teacher, our horizons are still being enriched and extended. When we recall her talent and her achievements as a gardener, we are taken from her lovely gardens in Llandaff or Bowerchalke and given a preview of the good things that God has prepared for us. When we treasure Marian's friendship and companionship and love, which have

illuminated our way and made us glad to be alive, we are experiencing something of the love that will not let us go.

In this funeral homily I had to acknowledge my ignorance and my uncertainty in the face of the world's suffering and individual questioning. 'I don't believe there is a knock-down argument that would completely satisfy all our questions or heal our grief or lead us through our confusion'. I simply returned to the theological understanding I've been trying to articulate here – 'I believe in that love (let's call it) deep in my heart that is both personal and cosmic, that meets us day by day and sustains us through life and death and beyond it'. In this sermon I quote psalm 139 which, as far as I am concerned, says it all and is a regular mantra of mine at funeral services - and will I hope be recited at mine.

O God thou hast searched me out and known me
Thou knowest my down sitting and mine uprising
Thou knowest my thoughts long before,
Thou art about my path and about my bed,
And spiest out all my ways.
Lo there is not a word in my tongue
But thou O Lord knowest it all together....
If I go up into heaven, thou art there
If I go down to hell thou art there also
If I take the wings of the morning
And alight in the uttermost parts of the west
Even there shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me

I also try to capture in this sermon something well known to, and often rehearsed by, poets, that we catch a clue to the eternal in the things that pass and fade. R S Thomas captures that sense of the eternal through the ephemeral in his poem *The Bright Field*. That for me is a profoundly resourceful idea, not of course confined to Christian perception. But the idea of *kairos* being caught in *chronos*, or God's eternity erupting into historical time, is a thought which begins to make sense for me of belief in the resurrection and begins to make sense of our experience of suffering and loss.

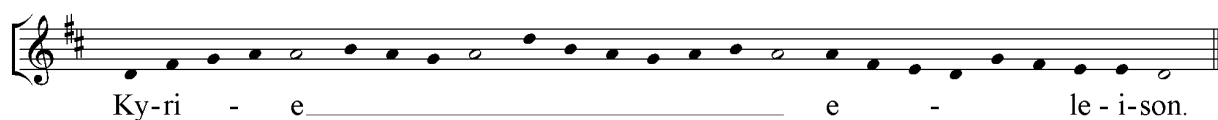
Those ideas and many more - especially the possibilities which poetry open up for us as we contemplate the mystery of life - were constantly explored and illuminated by a priest with strong links to this university and the college next door, for before becoming Dean of Westminster he was Vicar of Great St Mary's, and had been an undergraduate at Corpus. I speak of course of Michael Mayne.

No one knew more about preparing for death than Michael Mayne, for in the last year of his life, knowing that he had been diagnosed with a life-threatening tumour that in the end did not respond to treatment and from which he eventually died - knowing this Michael wrote the last of his five books - an autobiography of his last year that interspersed diary accounts of his day, his worsening health and its treatment, with moments of delight in the company of family and friends, savouring natural beauty of which he was such a keen observer, and being constantly uplifted by poetry and music which were life-long passions. Most of all the journal he kept which was produced as *The Enduring Melody* just before his death is a profound spiritual reflection in which prayer and contemplation, word and sacrament are the constant companions on his journey towards - I was going to say death but it reads like a journey into life - as though holiness (which I

think is the word I would use to describe Michael's God-ward journey) simply puts into sharper focus the spiritual themes that his life expressed and which matured as he grew older.

Michael didn't prepare for death apeing the ceremonies of the rite, as members of monastic communities once did - lying in their coffins as a way of meditating on their own mortality He recognised, that as we grow older we have to learn a new language - we have to be willing that is to accept the gradual loss of energy, the diminishment of our faculties, and the enforced move from active to passive. We also have to bring our nostalgia under control, although the world of our youth may cruelly have been pushed into the past. 'We may privately deplore these losses, but we must have the grace to celebrate the undoubted gains. But it's the spiritual preparation for our old age and death that is the hardest thing to achieve. 'Either we continue as we age to cling to our past achievements, our desire to dominate and control, or we learn gracefully to let go and discover a new freedom and a new unity with the created world in all its beauty and its creatures in all their variety. We can begin to piece together the story of our lives; to look clear-eyed at the suffering and the sorrow hidden in our memories; to come to terms with our sins, our mistakes, our failures to love as we might have done, our desire - often unrecognised until now - to control and manipulate others. Facing the darkness is an essential part of the healing, which enables us to be restored by what TS Eliot calls 'the refining fire'.

That 'letting go' is part of the 'daily preparation of death and not to fear it' to which John Mere encouraged the preacher to attend. Letting go was put into sharp focus for me some years ago, when a hospice nurse from Montana called to see me, when visiting the UK. He told me that all the infirmarians, indeed I think all the staff of the hospice where he worked in the United States were musicians – and music was a major component in the nursing and palliative care of patients and their families. He said: "We often use plainsong when we tend the terminally ill. Because there are no bar lines and no time signatures. There's a sense of timelessness or eternity about the chant. We believe it helps those who are dying to unbind, to let go of time and slip into timelessness, what you and I might call God's time". And he sang the plainsong Kyrie from the Missa de Angelis to illustrate his point:



Shortly before his death I visited Michael Mayne, knowing that he had days or possibly hours to live. He couldn't speak but his eyes smiled and he took my hand in his. I said some prayers with him: and then I sang: I sang the Kyrie from the Missa de Angelis with the words of that American hospice carer in mind. 'There's a sense of timelessness about the chant... which helps those who are dying to unbind'.

The unbinding of Michael's last year also involved moments of gathering together - not simply nostalgia which Michael recognised had to be brought under control - but a focus on those things that had nurtured the spirit in a life time's pilgrimage. *The Enduring Melody* records an entry Michael made in his journal the Ascensiontide before he died.

Spend the morning with Vikram Seth in George Herbert's rectory in Bemerton. Vikram and I take chairs and sit by the river Nadder. We drink green tea and talk about Herbert but more widely about poetry and what in life proves of lasting value, about the nature of

goodness and the power of empathy. I ask him to read for me Herbert's astonishing small poem which so powerfully conveys the nature of God's gracious love: Love bade me welcome. He recites it by heart. Eighteen lines which change for ever any false concept of a dominant, authoritarian God into that of one who serves and invites us to let Him wait on us.

The 'tasting of love's meat' would have recalled for Michael the Old Court at his old college, Corpus Christi, where the college emblem, the Pelican in her Piety, presides. A pelican feeding her brood from the blood of her own breast; the bird representing Christ himself as he sustains women and men in their need, by his own self-giving love.

The 'sitting down and eating' was part of Michael's spiritual discipline of receiving holy communion each day - a central part of his preparation for the business and adventure of life, and a crucial part of his preparation for the mystery of death whenever that might come.

But the 'Lord who bids us welcome' is also beckoning us to a life and a love - a banquet indeed - for which we can hardly prepare except by opening ourselves trustingly to God's love, mercy and grace, lavished upon us each moment of each day.

It is with that thought of life's ultimate destiny and destination that Michael Mayne concluded *The Enduring Melody* quoting words of Bishop John Austin Baker:

'I rest on God who will assuredly not allow me to find the meaning of life in his love and forgiveness, to be wholly dependent on him for the gift of myself, and then destroy that meaning, revoke that gift. He who holds me in existence now, can and will hold me still, through and beyond the dissolution of my mortal frame. For this is the essence of love, to affirm the right of the beloved to exist. And what God affirms, nothing and no one can contradict.'

"Even there shall my hand lead me and the right hand shall hold me"