

## Witney Way Feast 2013

### Death is a Fact of Life

A man goes up to the customer services desk of a departmental store,

*“Excuse me, I wonder if you can help, I’ve lost my wife.”*

*“I’m so sorry to hear that Sir, funeral services are on the fourth floor.”*

A common enough mistake you might think; after all, if you type *death* into a search engine, you’ll find dozens of euphemisms: passed on, passed over, deceased, departed...; we just don’t want to talk about it. We see it on our televisions every day, but these are usually unnatural deaths: acts of nature such as fires, earthquakes, tsunamis; accidents in the air, on the roads, at sea, in the home; the starved and diseased, war and repatriations, suicide bombings, 9/11 and 7/7, acts of violence against the person, shootings and stabbings, massacres and murder... somehow it’s always someone else; dreadful and distressing as it might be, there is a danger we might just register it, and then “... *pass by on the other side.*”

We respect the dead with rituals of burial and cremation, but the *wake* has been reduced to a short drink-and-a nibble for those who may have travelled: the black tie has replaced the black arm band, and the black picture-hat has replaced the widow’s weed. Once a year on Remembrance Day, the whole Country stops and honours those who died in wars to secure our continued freedom, at one of the 60,000 war memorials. But the natural act of dying, now usually takes place away from home and loved ones, in a hospital or care institution. Dying and death are recognised by ritual and liturgy for others, but is not to be found in homilies or daily discussion.

Colm Keane in his book “Death & Dying” writes, “*Talking about death and witnessing it, is a difficult issue with most cultures. Western societies may like to treat the dead with the utmost material respect, with an official embalmer and associated rites.*”<sup>(1)</sup> Dr Margo Wrigley adds, “... *the modern denial of death is part related to the reduced opportunity to witness death and participate in its rituals.*”<sup>(1)</sup> I’m sure no pun was intended, when Nigel Llewellyn: wrote “... *death seems more deeply buried than ever.*”<sup>(1)</sup>

Today we are protected from the inevitable, (death), in ways which former times were not. We have clean water and efficient sewerage systems, we have every opportunity to maintain a balanced diet, if we so choose, and we have immediate access to medical and health services. The resultant statistics are revealing: the average life expectancy for women is now 82, and for men 78: there has been a five-fold increase since 1980, in the number of people living to be 100 in the UK, currently around 13,000. In 2010, as if to delay or deny the inevitable, the UK spent a staggering £10.2 billion on cosmetics and anti-ageing preparations, which according to the Daily Mail, on average a woman in her lifetime, will have spent 474 days applying.<sup>(2)</sup> Also in 2010, £2.3 billion was spent on cosmetic surgery, a figure which rises year on year.

*“Death was at the centre of life in the Middle Age,”* - when life expectancy was around 40 years, half what it is now, - *“in a way that might seem shocking to us today. With high rates of infant mortality, disease, famine, the constant presence of war, and the inability of*

*medicine to deal with common injuries, death was a brutal part of most people's everyday experience. As a result, attitudes towards life were very much shaped by beliefs about death: indeed, according to Christian tradition, the **very purpose of life was to prepare for the afterlife** by avoiding sin, performing good works, taking part in the sacraments, and keeping to the teachings of the church.”*<sup>(3)</sup>

Although there was the acceptance that death was indeed a fact of life, there was still fear of the end; fear that the dying person might not actually be dead. The Wake, may have been more than a celebration for a life with its concomitant junketing, it may also have been intended to keep the dead awake amongst the dead as the soul passed into the next life. The suggestion that it was a vigil to see if the corpse woke up, has been refuted. However the fear was real. *“My sister writes that she has left instructions in her will, that her little finger is to be severed before the funeral, so that there will be no possibility ... of her being buried alive.”*<sup>(4)</sup> Lord Chesterfield in 1769 wrote, *“All I desire for my own burial is not to be buried alive.”* George Washington had pleaded on his death bed in 1797, *“Have me decently buried, but do not let my body be put into a vault in less than two days after I am dead,”* Similarly, Frederic Chopin’s last words as late as 1849 were, *“Swear to make them cut me open, so that I won't be buried alive,”* However there is no evidence that a sale was ever made, but an American patent was taken out in 1868 for the manufacture and sale of The Safety Coffin. There was a persistent belief that bodies could have a bell with them in their coffin, so that if they woke up, they could ring the bell; thus giving rise to the old phrase, *“Saved by the bell.”* But there is no evidence that the phrase was used earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then used pertaining to boxing.

Until the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was the custom to announce the moment of death, by the ringing of a church bell, tolling the bell, the Death Knell. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the bell was tolled when the church sexton received the news, unless it was after sunset, then it was rung early the following day. There were unwritten codes adopted by parishes to signify the age and gender of the deceased; the age might be communicated by the number of chimes, and the gender by, for example, three times three chimes for a man and three times two chimes for a woman.

“The Day of the Dead”, All Saints Day and All Souls Day, have long been celebrated in the Christian calendar. Long before the American import of trick-or-treat, people would take time off from working, visit cemeteries with flowers and candles, and offer prayers over the graves of loved ones.

Recently a 95 year old member of our family lay in semi-consciousness. Four months earlier she had been diagnosed with an inoperable cancerous stomach tumour. She had been hospitalised several times, but her wish was for a *“little more time”*, and to be allowed to die at home. On one of the last few days, she rallied and said to me,

*“I want to go.”*

*“Where do you want to go?”*

*“I want to go to heaven. Kill me Howard.”*

*“I can't do that.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“Because it’s murder, and I’ll spend the rest of my life in prison.”*

**Rev.** Dr Leslie Weatherhead tells of a parishioner whom he regularly visited. The man was totally paralysed, apart from the ability to move his eyes. Each time he visited, his minister could read the pleading in those eyes, *“Please just let me die”*; he was kept alive for 17 years.  
(5)

With the recent high profile cases of Tony Nicklinson, Paul Lamb and Martin; the debate and opinion polls surrounding, euthanasia, assisted suicide, mercy killing, the fact that two Brits a month travel to Dignitas in Switzerland..., the ethical / moral / religious debate is gaining ground, and deserves to be discussed and debated without recourse to uninformed sentiment and bigotry.

Prof. Anthony Clare writes, *“... death is seen in many cultures as a right of passage.”* (1)  
Many Indian and Eastern religions e.g. Hinduism, believe in the Cycle of Life *samsara* - living well and achieving *karma*, which determines what kind of rebirth can be expected. Sufis believe death is coming, so live your life in readiness for it. Followers of Shinto believe that when a person dies, their soul joins an important spiritual class.

Much or most, if not all of the above refers to the deaths of others and our *reaction* to the death of others. But as followers of Christ, what does it mean for us as individuals? How are we preparing for our own death? It was Woody Allen who said, *“I am not afraid of dying, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”* Perhaps if we’re honest, it is not death per se, which is our fear, but the act of dying; will it be painful? how long will it last? .....

**As** Dylan Thomas suggests, *“Do not go gentle into that good night ... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”*

But, Jesus promised, *“In my Father’s house are many mansions ... I go to prepare a place for you.”* (JOHN 14:2) Each time we recite the Apostles’ Creed, we affirm *“... I believe ... in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”*(6) Or the Nicene Creed, *“We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”*(6) At the Committal ceremony, the priest says, *“...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.”*

Dr Anthony O’Flaherty writes, *“... an important measure is to accept the inevitability of death and to prepare for it.”*(1) Is it still the case that, *“...the very purpose of life was to prepare for the afterlife.”*?(3 above)

**Or** as Freud maintained, *“The aim of all life, is death.”*(8)

Thomas Ken (1637-1711) a Prebendary of Winchester Cathedral, Bishop's Chaplain and Fellow of Winchester College, wrote the words of the well-loved hymn, "*Glory to Thee, my God, this night.*" In verse 3 he asks, "*Teach me to live, that I may dread the grave as little as my bed.*"

Rev Henry Francis Lyte ministered to his flock in Lower Brixham in Devon. In September 1847, having been diagnosed with consumption, he was advised to seek the sun in Nice. His final sermon was tearful for all concerned, "*I stand among you today as alive from the dead, that I may impress upon you to prepare for that solemn hour which must come to us all, by a timely acquaintance with the death of Christ.*"<sup>(7)</sup> That night in a grief-stricken state, he wrote:

*"Abide with me; fast falls the eventide.  
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me."*

My wife sat by the bedside of her dying mother for 10 hours a day for the last 10 days. As she handed over responsibility to the night nurse, Mother opened her eyes and said, "*Good bye.*" She was now prepared. 20 minutes later we were home and the 'phone was ringing; the nurse reported that Mother had died just as we left. Doctors and nurse who minister to the dying, frequently recall, how the dying seem to be asking for permission to die, but they don't want it to happen in front of their loved ones.

At Baroness Margaret Thatcher's funeral in St Pauls Cathedral on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2013, Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, concluded his sermon, "*In this Easter season Death is revealed, not as a full stop but as the way into another dimension of Life. As Eliot puts it: "What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."*"

The motto of The Boy Scouts is, "***Be Prepared.***"

NOTES:

- (1) Keane, Colm, *Death & Dying*, Dublin, Mercier, 1995
- (2) Daily Mail, February 20, 2013
- (3) Learning Medieval Realm, British Library Board,
- (4) Fitzgerald, Penelope, *The Gate of Angels*, London, Collins, 1990
- (5) Weatherhead, Leslie, *The Christian Agnostic*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1965
- (6) *Common Worship*, Church House Publishing, 2000
- (7) McClelland, James, *The Stories Behind Great Hymns*, Glasgow, Ambassador, 1985
- (8) Freud, Sigmund, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, Penguin Modern Classic 2003

Howard Brayton

