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## REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

Margaret Wylly recently made a wonderful comment at the graveside. "I love hearing the bugler play Taps," she said, "It reminds you of death and yet there is beauty."

We had just finished the burial of General George Lynch. The military honors that followed our service were in keeping with the dignity and solemnity of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. All was done decently and in order. But I cannot help but think that, as so often happens, the way we think of a person in death reflects the way that person lived in life. The playing of Taps is simply beautiful, but it was how George lived his life that made hearing such beauty readily apparent.

One of the privileges of the priesthood is to share these precious moments in the lives of others. The burial of each person is singular and has some special quality to remember. For the most part we die as we live. None is perfect. Few are regrettable. All come under the never failing mercy of God.

For most people, it is the custom of charity to remember the good qualities of a person's life. Sometimes this is done to an extreme, and the life of a person is transformed into fantasy. After hearing such a fanciful and embellished account of one man, William once declared that he would not participate in the canonization of that person. Remembering the dead must have some sobriety of truth as well. But for the most part we try, as we should, to recall the singular qualities and even humorous idiosyncrasies of a person.

In this burial it was easy to reflect on a generous and good life. George had been a consummate gentleman, a loyal churchman, a devoted friend to many, and a solid citizen. He was always supportive and complimentary and helpful to me. I truly cannot remember, ever, seeing or hearing, or hearing about, anything that George did or said that cast a shadow over his character. That cannot be said of very many of us, certainly not of me. Most of us have truly bad moments. We complain about the church. Our tongues love to gossip and give flight to old rumor. We presume to be the wise old owls, and we look for the prey in dim light. I am sure that George was not perfect, but he was quite remarkably good and kind and unselfish. That is, at least, how I knew him. And, oh yes, his Vestry reports were always salted with funny remarks and his standards appropriately high. Justice and fair dealing were not far from his mind.

I am using George's burial as an example. I do not think he will mind. I do not mean to write a eulogy. I have not recounted all of his amazing eleemosynary works. It comes easy and is a delight to speak well of him.

What I mean to say, which stayed with me after Margaret's comment, was that death has a solemn beauty about it. It brings us face to face with eternity and with "the shortness and uncertainty of human life."

And yet there is something else that remains at the center and infuses every part of the burial service, of our mourning, and of our hope.

It is simply this. We bury a person. And each person is unique. We may remark on what we know of a person's life, and we may presume to make judgments, although we do not know all there is to know. And for that reason it is a most comforting fact of the universe that we do not and cannot judge. That is God's sovereign prerogative. He, and he alone, has the ability, the truth, the justice, and the mercy to judge. We can leave that to him and trust that his judgment is just and good.

A Christian burial is, indeed, supremely personal. We commend the soul of a person to God. We commit his body, or ashes, to the ground or the great deep. We do so with the dignity and solemnity of high ceremony. This is of the utmost importance. This person is worthy of such respect and honor not because of what the person has done but because of what God has done. We are what we are by God's design and creative will. We are who we are by lineage, history, and choice. Only God can measure the substance of the latter, while the former is objectively true by his creation. We may have marred what we are by who we have become. But what we are is created in the image of God. And that personal nature is for us worthy of the highest dignity and care. No amount of sentimental sharing or "celebrating a person's life" can fathom the depths of what a person is. That glory is God's only, and he has made us in the image of his personal being. A creation such as this requires the beauty and sobriety of high ceremonial. Reminiscences and jokes and fond memories are best left for the bourbon and the scotch afterward.

The fact that a person is worthy of such honor, because he is a person created in the image of God, is clearly seen in the 1928 BCP Burial Office. Some, who cannot see past contemporary forms of liturgy, have commented that our service is cold and impersonal. But it is not. It is full of strength and noble sentence. It is therefore able to support even the most tragic circumstances of death. It holds and supports the dignity of a person when the changes and chances of this mortal life threaten to undo it.

From the very first sentence of the Burial Office we are aware of the importance of the individual and how he is given the great honor and privilege to know the person of Jesus. He is the resurrection and the life of all that is personal. And then we hear words from the book of Job, "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth, and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger." This is the sum and substance of our burial office. Seeing God as the infinitely personal being who is to us Creator, Savior, and Friend and is come to us in Jesus Christ is the most wonderful comfort and joy. It is deeper than our pain and grief. And so

it is beautiful even in the midst of agonizing sorrow. We feel it all because we are ourselves persons, made in the image of God, for God, and who find him and his tender mercies in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This is our profound joy, dignified, solemn, sober, but gentle, merciful, and hopeful for those ready to hear it. It is like the playing of Taps, quiet, a reminder of nightfall, and of death's sleep. It remains until we hear another trumpet sound, when Jesus will give us his victory, and in the twinkling of an eye, the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and by grace, we shall be changed.

**The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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