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THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

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Does anyone read Aldous Huxley these days? His dystopian fable, *Brave New World*, was once a staple of high school English reading lists. It depicts a world of "hollow men" from which pain and transcendence have been abolished in favour of easy choices and sensual pleasure. As I recall (perhaps erroneously), some of the characters decide that they cannot bear to live life without hardship, truth, and beauty, and they are given their choice of certain "reservations", where suffering and transcendence are still possible. If memory serves, one chooses to live on the rugged Falkland Islands for the sake of the bracing South Atlantic climate – a choice which, at this point in the Deep Southern summer, sounds rather appealing.

That choice of hardship and transcendence over painless sensual pleasure comes to mind whenever I take part in the service which the Prayer Book so uncompromisingly and bracingly names "The Burial of the Dead". Contemporary fashion prefers to accentuate the positive by calling a funeral "The Celebration of Life". Such a name invites us to look back on what is now past and done, as an alternative to the present moment of bereavement, but it offers us no comfort for the future. It offers us the

meager consolations of memory, but not the comfort of hope. Paradoxically, it is burial that the Bible teaches us is the act of hope. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:24, 25). The same image, that of the seed buried in order to come to life, appears in the lesson from the Burial office, from 1st Cor. 15:36: "That which thou sowest is not quickened [brought to life] except it die." Clinging to what is past leaves us holding nothing, not even what is past; whereas death and burial bring us to new and greater life. Thus, "the burial of the dead" is the act of real comfort and supreme hope in the face of death – "sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ".

Here is the dynamic of the Prayer Book service. Acknowledging frankly the frailty of our mortal nature, made inescapably evident in the fact of death, it leads us into the stupendous hope and comfort of our redemption in Christ by the power of God. Thus the recognition of our mortality, in the anthems at the graveside: "Man that is born of a

woman hath but a short time to live and

is full of misery. He cometh up, and is

cut down; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased? Yet, O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death." The first two verses, from Job 14:1-2, lead into Cranmer's translation of the 10th century hymn, *In media vita*. Inspired, it is said, by the sight of men building a bridge over a chasm high in the Swiss Alps with nothing but a few ropes and planks between them and a dizzying plunge to death, this hymn became enormously popular in the Middle Ages, and was sung at Vespers in Lent and by warriors going into battle. Its acknowledgement of "the shortness and uncertainty of human life" together with the peril of "eternal death", is the grounds for the most poignant of pleas: "Suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee." We may fall from the scaffolding into the abyss, we may fall in battle, we may fall in any of the "changes and chances of this mortal life"; what matters is that we not fall from grace and faith.

The pathos of these anthems – set to exquisite music by Henry Purcell – is the foil for stupendous and audacious hope, set forth most fully in the long, dense lesson from 1 Corinthians 15. "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that sleep..." "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" – words whose intrinsic drama is caught by Handel in his setting of them in *The Messiah*. The victory of God in Christ brings all things, even death itself, into subjection "that God may be all in all". The "natural body" of sinful Adam buried like a seed in the earth, will be raised a "spiritual body", transfigured like that of the risen Christ, "made like unto his glorious body". "Behold, I show you a mystery.... Death is swallowed up in victory."

In a world of hollow men, here is a hope for men: a hope in which to die and in which to live. Hope for the future gives us a reason to live hopefully in the present, in lives of faith, repentance, and good works: "wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

It is natural for us to honour the memory of the dead in the affection and respect that has bound us together in life. Yet nature itself looks for that grace whereby nature may be redeemed. And so there is no better moment than when we stand by the grave to embrace the hope of nature's redemption – no better moment for us to seek "the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

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