

Dying in the light of the Gospel

(St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Glasgow, 19 March 2000)

The prophet Isaiah sees death as a garment of mourning that all humanity wears, or a shroud that hangs over the whole creation, or perhaps a dark veil that hides even God from view (Isa 25:7). We might think of the preternatural darkness that covered the hill of Calvary as Jesus hung dying in the mid-afternoon. Death is not just the end to which all people come. The threat and the sadness of death cloud the whole of life, sapping its vitality, dampening its joys and mocking its hopes. In the vivid experiences of the psalmists who taste the bitterness of death and beg God's deliverance, death is not just the end awaiting them, but a force which runs ahead of itself, preying on life, threatening and diminishing life. In danger and depression, sickness and isolation, abandoned by friends and forsaken by God, the psalmists feel themselves in the grip of death, and in God's interventions they experience the God who raises the dead just as truly as if they had literally died. We try to keep death in its place, hidden in hospitals and kept out of our thoughts and our words, we try to confine its power to the end of life, but we fail. Death comes to meet us in the midst of life, threatening and undermining life. The isolation of death, the irreparable loss, the pain of separation, the futility - these experiences invade life and try hard to crush it. Death's greatest power is to rob life of meaning and hope. What is the point if this is what it must all come to? Life must always be lived in defiance of death and death is always at work subjecting life to its own purposes - or rather to its endless futility.

This biblical recognition of death as a force of negation against everything positive is very different from the idea (an idea many contemporary people try to live with) that death is natural and biologically necessary and so good. The dead leaves become compost from which next spring's new life grows. As the seasons revolve, the cycle of nature moves through decay and death to rebirth and new growth. Life leads to death but death also leads to life. Life, in a sense, needs death. Just as someone once said that time is God's way of preventing everything from happening at once, so we might say that death is God's way of preventing everyone from living at once. The evolution of life, the development of human history need death so that one generation may follow another. This sense of the biological naturalness of death is not denied by the Bible. Adam was made from the dust of the earth and naturally returns to dust when God leaves him to do so. But the Bible significantly does not go the way of many a nature religion in taking the cycle of the seasons as its model for reality, and so absorbing death into a cosmic process. In the Bible there is no easy togetherness, no complementarity of life and death. Rather there is a constant dialectic of life and death in which humans are caught and suffer.

Why should we not be content to think of death as a natural process? Because life and death are so much more than just biological. Because people are irreplaceable. Maybe this year's spring flowers are an adequate replacement for those that died last year. I can forget last year's because this year's are just as good. But people are irreplaceable individuals. We treasure the memories of the unique persons the dead were. It is small consolation to the bereaved to point out that their loved one is making way for the next generation. Death is the power of irretrievable and irreplaceable loss. And the biological process of life and death seems weighted in its favour. Whole species are irretrievably lost. Every uniquely beautiful landscape passes away. The sun will cool and all life will wither away in the final slow dying

away of the universe. We would have to become computers not to regret the transience and the dying of all we value, not to feel the universal sadness of the cosmos subjected to futility. And if our God were no more than the natural process of this world we should have to reconcile ourselves to such diminished life. But the biblical God transcends nature, is the power of everliving life, does not intend to leave his creation to perish.

At the heart of the biblical story is the dying of one man, told four times in detailed accounts. They are stories that gather all the anguish of the human experience of death into them. Not only does Jesus suffer his dying, his being left to die by his God, but also those few of his friends who dare to be with him at the end suffer his dying and his death. In these stories there is almost unendurable pain, there is parting and isolation and forsakenness, there is the threat of futility, and there is no easy consolation. It is not as day follows night or as spring follows winter that resurrection follows. It is as the decisive breakthrough of God's unlimited life into the dominion of death that Jesus rose from the dead. The tide of mortality is turned back. Furthermore, just as death cannot be confined to the end of life, nor can resurrection. Resurrection runs ahead of itself into mortal lives, filling with meaning and hope, lifting the forsakenness, drawing the sting of death, lightening the shadow death casts over all of life, and shining its own bright light into the portals of death. Eternal life, resurrection life, enters the daily dialectic of life and death. It counters the threat death poses to the whole of life. It liberates life for the service of life and not death. And where death strives to subject life to its own futility, the life of the risen Christ, the life of the Spirit of God, even presses death itself into the service of life.

This is the key to Paul's extraordinary language in 2 Corinthians. 'Always carrying in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies' (2 Cor 4:10). In the experiences of mental and spiritual buffeting and exhaustion that brought Paul constantly near to death, it is the dying of Jesus that is taking place in his body, so that the life of the risen Jesus may be shown in Paul's life and made available to others. Paul does not escape the inroads of death on his life. He more or less walks into them, because his following of Jesus leads him into suffering for the sake of others. But the new life of the risen Christ is present as a power over death in those very experiences of weakness and mortality. In Paul's willingness to face death for the sake of others, life is prevailing over death. In Paul's hope - hope directed to the God who raises the dead - life is prevailing over the deathly hopelessness and futility of the life that is subject to death. Even as Paul's bodily strength and capacities are diminished, life is all the more lively within him, overflowing from his life to others. The dialectic of life and death is thus not abolished. It is intensified, as life shows its power precisely in the face of death.

To all this the key lies in Paul's use of the phrase 'the dying of Jesus.' Paul faces death not just as death, not just as his own death, but as somehow or other his participation in the dying of Jesus. The New Testament writers, faced with death in any of its manifestations, always return to that four-times-told story of Jesus' dying - because it was there that God once and for all turned the tables on death and recruited death itself for the service of life. I mentioned that in those stories a few faithful followers accompany Jesus to his end and thus experience his dying and his death. Death is perhaps the loneliest of experiences. No one shares it. But those who love and accompany the dying do, in a different way, experience the death. Not the same experience as the one who dies has, but in a different way an experience of that

person's death. We too can experience Jesus' death like those who stood by the cross. The stories are written for us to do so. We can share what must have seemed the futility of that death, the end of all the extravagant hopes that had been focused on Jesus by his followers. Because he had been identified with the hopes of humanity, it is a kind of universal death Jesus dies. That even Jesus must end up like this draws into his death all the sadness, the hopelessness, the pointlessness with which death shadows the whole of life. All death's threats to ourselves we can see taking effect in him.

Suppose we follow the women from the cross to the tomb, suppose we learn of Jesus' resurrection. Then we can do what cannot really be done in life, but can be done by readers of stories: we can go back to the passion stories and ask ourselves what it means that God raised this man from death. It means - against all appearances - that God is in this dying. In this death that sums up all that death at its worst can do God is present. The bleak horror of Jesus' death is not cancelled out. The point is precisely that God is in that bleak horror. If we find God in this death we shall experience every other death differently.

There's a story about John Wesley's dying words. When he had become very weak, he muttered some words that no one with him could hear properly. Realising this, Wesley, a preacher to the last, made a tremendous effort to communicate what he had to say. Gathering up what little strength he had left, he managed to shout out: 'The best of all is: God is with us.' If we can find God in Jesus' dying, then we shall find God in our own, however different it may otherwise be.

The time when God will wipe away every tear from every eye is still to come. Now we still suffer the dialectic of life and death. We still encounter the threats of death in all of life and to all of life. But, if we know the God who raised Jesus from the dead, we cannot simply acquiesce in the natural course of life towards death. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus aligns us with God's great counter-movement of life for the dead. It is this that gives us hope in the face of death, and this that sustains the love with which we may care for the dying and comfort the bereaved.

Returning to Paul's thoughts on death and life in 2 Corinthians, we find this extraordinary statement: 'We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day' (2 Cor 4:16). Paul, like all of us, is subject to the natural course of life towards death. But what God is doing in Paul runs in quite a different direction. Daily renewal. That means God's creative making new of his creation, rescuing his creation from death, renewing it in union with his own eternal life, not making another world but renewing this world, giving it an eternal future beyond the reach of death. Paul sees this divine creation of life out of death going on in his own life at the same time as he experiences the normal processes of degeneration and death. Daily he experiences this dialectic of death and life.

So there are two dialectics. There is the ordinary dialectic of mortal life and death. This is at work in all of us. It creates in us a taste for life that makes dying a tragedy. However much we may champion mortal life against death, the cause is finally hopeless. Death has the last word. What makes the difference for Christians, as for Paul, is the other dialectic of death and life, the dying of Jesus and the risen life of Jesus. Experiencing the death of Jesus, we are drawn into this dialectic of *his* death

and *his* life. This death leads to life. It leads finally the day the prophet foresaw, when God will swallow up death forever (Isa 25:8).