

Grief and hope

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given at the Memorial Service on Sunday 29th October 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Bible Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9 (GNB)

Other readings:

Gone too soon *Buzz Kohan (as sung by Michael Jackson)*

The Ship *Bishop Charles Henry Brent*

The Existence of Love *Marjorie Pizer*

Introduction: A little quiz

We are here to remember those we love who have died. So I thought I'd open up the subject with a little quiz – just two questions.

1. What do these two people have in common?

- The footballer Sir Bobby Charlton, and
- Glenda Jackson, actress and Labour MP

They were both famous people who died this year in their 80's. Bobby Charlton died this month aged 86, and Glenda Jackson died in June this year, aged 87.

2. What about these three people?

- Elvis Presley, died August 1977
- Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, who died in 1861
- Rob Collingwood, a pilot with Wiltshire Air Ambulance, died of cancer in April this year.

They all died at the age of 42. Two of them were famous, and touched many people's lives. Rob Collingwood was not famous outside of his family and his circle of friends and work colleagues. He was much more like the people we are remembering today. But he too made a big difference to the lives of other people. This is what a spokesperson for Wiltshire Air Ambulance said:

“Rob loved working for the charity and the staff loved him. He was so passionate about our cause and understood the importance of being a team player. He had a real passion for environmental sustainability, a strong faith and was always positive.”

The different faces of grief

What have all of *us* got in common? We are from different backgrounds and family circumstances, but we are all here to remember someone we love who has died. They may or may not have been well-known in the world; they may have died at a good age or young; they may have died suddenly or after a long illness; but like the people I have already mentioned, they all left their mark on the world; they all made an impact on those they knew and loved, and we miss them today.

We have all lost someone, but that doesn't mean we are all feeling the same way. Grief is a very personal thing – we all experience it in our own way. Some people express their feelings very openly; others prefer to grieve quietly on their own. What grief feels like for each of us depends on so many things – the circumstances of our loss, our personality and outlook on life, and our previous experiences of

bereavement. And how we feel can vary enormously from day to day. You may have a good day when you feel really on top of things, and life is looking better again; and then the next day your loss overwhelms you.

Our readings today reflect some of that variety of experience. Our first reading was the lyrics of a song made popular by Michael Jackson, *Gone too soon*. It wasn't written for him, but he made it his own when he sang it at the funeral of a young lad who died of AIDS aged 18 named Ryan White. Ryan was a haemophiliac, who had contracted HIV at the age of 13 through receiving contaminated blood. The song speaks to anyone who has lost someone prematurely through illness or accident. I suspect there are many here today who feel that the person they loved has "gone too soon".

Our second reading was written by an American bishop, Charles Brent, and expresses a very different view of death. In it, we are told death is like a ship leaving one shore and disappearing from sight as it heads into the distance. But Bishop Brent tells us that the ship itself isn't any smaller, or any less real, just because it is lost to our view. And somewhere else, people will see it arriving and welcome it to its new destination. It's a very positive and hopeful image, reminding us that the person who has died has not ceased to exist, just because we can't see them any more.

In our third reading, the Australian poet Marjorie Pizer speaks of how when her loved one died she was overcome with a sense of grief, but that over time she has come to appreciate the gift that her loved one's life and love was.

This is not to deny the reality of the pain of losing someone, but rather to affirm that a time will come when happy thoughts about their life will become more important than the pain of their death.

Two important things

I think there are two important things which a memorial service like this can offer. The first thing is an acknowledgement of the real pain of losing someone, and an opportunity to express those feelings through taking part in this service. For many of us, this includes offering our experiences and our feelings to God, who knows us, understands us and can give us strength and comfort.

The other thing which can make a big difference is to see our losses in the context of a bigger picture – that of God’s good purposes for the world, and for each of us. The hymns we are singing this evening, and the anthems sung by the choir all have a message of hope and faith. And this evening’s Bible reading from the first letter of St Peter reinforces that.

Peter was writing to people he had probably never met, Christians living in what is now western Turkey, many of whom were going through tough times. And so, to encourage them, Peter begins his letter with words of praise to God, who has given us a new hope and a new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the promise of blessings in heaven that can never be taken away by suffering or death. “We look forward”, he writes, “to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for his people. He keeps them for

you in heaven, where they cannot decay or spoil or fade away.”¹

Peter also acknowledges that “it may now be necessary for you to be sad for a while because of the many kinds of trials you suffer².” But, he says, having faith in Jesus can give us a new, positive outlook which focusses on God’s loving purposes for us all.

A good funeral

My mother died in July this year at the age of 91. We were fortunate that all the family were able to take part, even though one of my sons and one of my nephews had to take part remotely via the internet. A funeral is an opportunity to celebrate the life of someone we love, and while there is sadness at their loss, we can be grateful for all that was good in their lives. In many funerals I have conducted we have had family members and friends telling anecdotes about the person who has died, often funny ones. A bit of laughter is very therapeutic, and I don’t think it's disrespectful – in fact it’s the opposite, because we are affirming the uniqueness of our loved one.

My mother certainly had her quirks, particularly in her later years. But for me, her greatest legacy was her faith, which she passed on to me, and which has helped me to see life and death within God’s loving purposes for the world. This does not answer all the questions we may have, but it does

¹ 1 Peter 1:4 GNB

² 1 Peter 1:6 GNB

give strength for today and hope for a brighter future tomorrow.

Over to God

This evening, as we bring our memories of those we love and express our grief, our thanks and our hope, I pray that God will give us all the strength to bear whatever load of sorrow we are feeling. May he release us from the burden of any regrets, and give hope for a future beyond this world, in which tears will be wiped away, sins forgiven and wounds healed, in which the darkness of death is overcome by the glorious light of eternal life, offered to us through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.