

The Best is Yet to Come

Brian Grogan SJ

‘With Jesus’s resurrection death has a new meaning.’ In an extract from his book, *Where to From Here?: The Christian Vision of Life After Death*, Irish Jesuit Brian Grogan explores the Christian understanding of the mystery of death.

There’s the story of the little old lady who felt that her life was ebbing away. She called in the minister to make her final arrangements. ‘When I’m properly laid out,’ she said, ‘I want you to put a dinner fork in my hands.’ ‘Why so?’ he asked. ‘Well, when I was young, and we’d had our dinner, my mother used to tell us: “Keep your fork: the best is yet to come.”’

The mystery of death has been interpreted and ritualised in many different ways over the ages. Here we will sketch the central Christian tradition on death by contrasting it with other views. Christian death rituals have a quality of celebration. They are shot through with hope-filled anticipation that, despite the extinguishing of a life, the best is indeed yet to come.

- In contrast to atheists, agnostics and humanists, Christians believe in the existence of God. God, they say, is not an abstract philosophic construct but a God who cares intensely for everyone, even beyond death. The real God is ‘God not of the dead but of the living, for to God all people are in fact alive’ (Lk 20:38). In the Christian perspective, there are no dead persons, only persons who have passed through death and are now fully alive to God and others.

- While the Greeks held that the soul survives death because of its natural immortality, Christians hold for the resurrection of the total person, body and soul. They believe that those who have died now exist in their perfected individuality, rather than simply as a memory in the mind of God.

- The central Christian belief about the transformation of death is focused on a historical person,



Jesus. If it were proved that Jesus never existed, or had not risen from the dead, Christian hope in the life of the world to come would collapse. ‘If Christ is not risen from the dead, then of all people we are the most foolish’ Paul admits (1 Cor 15:19). But this alleged event of his rising, I have argued, is sufficiently well attested to offer a mature and reasonable basis for belief that with Jesus’ resurrection death has a new meaning. ‘From that moment man’s relation

to death was changed; for the vanquishing Christ illumined for all time to come “those who sit in the shadow of death” (Lk 1:79). He freed them from that “law of sin and death” to which they had previously been slaves (Rm 8:2).’¹ Jesus’ rising from the dead justifies our ‘sure and certain hope of the resurrection into eternal life’ as the Anglican Book of Common Prayer puts it. Belief in the transformation of human death by Jesus is the key to Christian faith and hope. Christian tradition, following Hebrew thought, emphasises the link between sin and death, but sees Jesus’ saving action as achieving three things: it brings into human history the forgiveness of sin; it breaks the stranglehold of death, and it enables us to be the friends of God. Divine love encompasses sin and thereby draws ‘the sting of death’, even though because of the distortion which sin brings into reality, we often experience death as annihilation and abandonment.

- At least since Vatican II, Catholic belief is that those who follow traditions other than Christianity or none at all are also in God’s good hands, and that eternal life is accessible to all who come to mature human loving:

Since Christ died for everyone, and since all are in fact called to the one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.²

Christians are to be humbly grateful that God's Good News about the destiny of humankind has been shown to them. This news is entrusted to them for sharing: it is not a private secret. Christians, of all people, must tirelessly foster a just and inclusive society and give others hope of something yet to come, which is based on the full flowering of relationships.

Christian Pastoral Practice

We now focus on pastoral aspects of the Christian tradition about death. While we can do nothing to save ourselves from death, our faith opens up a vision of a world beyond. In its funeral liturgy, the Christian community magnificently expresses its belief in the saving action of God and his infinitely kind response to the prospect of human annihilation. While every death looks the same in its finality, Christians believe that something profound is going on behind the scenes. The emptiness we experience is transformed into a total openness that is filled by God.

When our time comes to die, the Christian community will gather, not simply to mourn and say farewell to us, but to see us off on our journey home to God. Jesus will be our escort of grace, to guard us on our way. He has freed us from the power of the enemy and 'opened the gates of Paradise for us'. He will bring us home, and is himself food for the journey, so before our human life runs out we receive the Eucharist. *Viaticum* is the old Latin term for the reception of the Eucharist when we are near death. It literally means 'on the journey with you'. Thus, on our way from this world to God, Jesus is our companion, another word rich in significance. 'Companion' comes from the Latin (*com-panis* — 'sharing bread with another'). Just as we share bread with our friends, Jesus 'shared bread' with his friends, most significantly at the Last Supper, but also at the inn at Emmaus, where he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples on their journey (cf. Lk 24:30). The reservation of the consecrated bread became a Christian tradition, so that if Mass were unavailable, *viaticum* would symbolise powerfully that Jesus is sharing bread with the dying person.

Jesus undertakes to save us from the forces that can destroy us: he ensures us a safe crossing into the Promised Land. The shepherd watches out for the sheep so that in our dying we may have life, and 'have it abundantly' (Jn 10:1-10). God's mark of ownership is on us (cf. Eph 1:13). We like to wear brand names such as Gucci, Armani or Tommy Hilfiger, but deepest down and most precious is our Christian name, which symbolises that God has formally named us as his own and recognises us as such. Everyone of course belongs to God, but many do not know it through no fault of their own: we know it and are grateful for it.

Our Commendation

The Christian community entrusts the dying person to God. The act of commendation mirrors the phrase of the dying Jesus to his Father, 'Into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk 23:46). The person dying is about to embark on a journey: the Church asks God to be ready to receive her or him. Here Christian relationships come dramatically into play: the dying person remains sustained by the *koinonia* which overarches the void of death. In the moment of dying the person is still safely in the gathering of the *koinonia*, which is on this side of the void; immediately after death the person awakes to find themselves safely in the *koinonia*, on the other side. Our great fear is that dying will be like an anaesthetic from which we won't ever wake up. Awareness of the relationships that sustain us gives hope and comfort in the final stage of life. Divine and human hands are stretched out to us and will hold us tight. Love is indeed stronger than death!

A Call From Home

When you next attend a funeral liturgy, notice first the persons gathered. Most obvious is the deceased in their mortal remains, then family and friends and the wider Christian community: the presiding minister leads the intercession on their behalf. On a deeper level, Jesus is present throughout: it is he who makes Christian dying an event full of hope. He comes together with his Father and the Holy Spirit to meet the person who has died. The funeral ritual is interpersonal, the fulfilling of a loving promise — 'I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (Jn 14:3). That promise is secure because the person who made it is divine and is

totally 'for' the person who has died, no matter how their life was played out.

As you attend, imagine for a few moments that this is your funeral! Imagine that the focus is on you, that it is your name that is spoken in the prayers. The key message of the readings and of the Eucharist is one of hope that Christ will bring you into eternal joy. The community will invite the Lord to remember you, and will ask the Spirit to make of you an everlasting gift to the Father. Your death will be seen as the moment when you got 'a call from home' because God wants you to be with him forever. The word 'home' which has so many emotional resonances, now refers to life in the company of God and of those who have supported you through life and now await your homecoming. You will not feel lonely or lost, but at home in the best of good company. Your death day becomes your birth day into eternal life.

Your body will be treated with the greatest respect, as it is signed with the Christian symbol of the cross, sprinkled with holy water and incensed. All of this is a recognition that the integral person that you were will be raised incorruptible, immortal, and glorious, body and soul. In this life you were a temple of the Holy Spirit: now the Holy Spirit, who is 'the Lord and Giver of Life', will bring you totally to life.

Those who mourn you will be consoled by being reminded that 'all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death'.³ While you are indeed moving into a new dimension of existence with God, you will become a source of blessing for those who will miss you and who yearn to share eternal joy with you.

Symbols and Images

The image of the small boat setting sail from the crowded quayside can help. When the boat disappears from sight the shout goes up: 'There she goes!' But from the other side, clear and distinct over the water, comes the cheer 'Here she comes!' Early Christians used the image of a ship with a mast and pilot: the boat symbolised the Church and its captain, Christ, with his saving Cross as mast. The image recalled the disciples in the storm: by Jesus' intervention they arrive safely home (Mt 14:22-33). So will be our passing over to eternal life.

In the early Church the pagan 'wake' became the Christian 'vigil' or watch. The image comes from waiting through the dark night for the dawn – in the vigil, friends celebrate the dawn of eternal life for one of their number. Christian hope is that for those who have died, the best is yet to come, in contrast to the view that we simply cease to be.

The funeral procession has overtones of the procession of the bride to meet the bridegroom (see Mt 25:6). The Church on earth sends departing Christians on their way, and asks the Church in heaven to come to meet them. Angels and saints are asked to escort the newly arrived pilgrims to the throne of God. The grave was originally seen as a resting place on the journey to God. Flowers were sculpted on the gravestone, not just because they are beautiful in themselves, but to symbolise the Garden of Eden to which the departed person is returning. Today's funeral wreaths and bouquets have a rich and ancient meaning!

We die like beggars with empty baskets: we have nothing of our own to barter with. Our hope of eternal life depends on the generosity of God. But we believe that from the suffering and failures of life, God will bring good, and so all will be well. We can relax and let go, as with caring hands our trustworthy escort places us in the hands of a loving Father. 'Do not be afraid, I go before you always!' (Dt 1:31-33). A recent book on care for the dying is called *May I Walk You Home?*⁴ We can rightly imagine Jesus saying these words to us when we come to die, and the next chapter will explore the role of Jesus in the life to come.

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*This article is an extract from his book, *Where To From Here?: The Christian Vision of Life After Death*, published by Veritas in 2011.*

¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 118.

² *Gaudium et spes*, §22.

³ *Order of Christian Funerals* (Dublin: Veritas, 1991), p. 35.

⁴ Joyce Hutchinson and Joyce Rupp, *May I Walk You Home?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1999).