

Alan Bennett's short story 'The Laying on of hands' tells the story of a memorial service in a central London church built by Inigo Jones. The great, the good and the heartbroken gather for Clive's memorial. But amongst them is also Miss Wishart claiming to be Clive's Aunt but Miss Wishart came to every funeral or memorial service because at least church was warm. She claimed to be a distant relative of the deceased, a pretence not hard to maintain, as she was genuinely hard of hearing and so could ignore the occasional probing question. Sometimes she was lucky and got invited back for the funeral tea. This memorial service like so many began with a well-known actress reading immaculately a piece about death not really being the end but just like popping next door followed by a reading from 1 Corinthians 12 in the rolling cadences of the Authorised Version, swiftly followed by a saxophone rendition of the Dusty Springfield standard, 'You don't have to say you love me'. It had been billed as a celebration, the marrying of the valedictory and the festive. Bennet writes 'To call it a celebration also allowed the congregation to dress up not down, so that though the millinery might be more muted, one could have been forgiven for thinking this was a wedding not a wake. But some did cry. Bennet comments 'funeral tears seldom flow for anyone other than the person crying them. They cried for Clive, it is true, but they cried for themselves without Clive. His death meant that he had left them with nothing to remember him by'.

We are caught up in a society increasingly unable to handle death. My cultural heritage still keeps death within the domestic context with open coffins at home and children becoming familiar with dead bodies from a very young age. Whilst many adults – even within this congregation may not have been so up close with death – its colour, its smell, its cold feel. Yet death has not gone away. So we are seeking out new rituals to try and apprehend the one thing which gives more momentum to the search for human meaning than anything else. Funerals now often straddle the line between celebration and grief. Roadside shrines are no longer something to be seen on the continent as we physically find expressions of grief, new rituals emerge in Wootton Bassett to deal with repatriation in a time of war, and the cortege of celebrities like Stephen Gately or Jade Goody is applauded.

As we enter the month of November, and celebrate All Saints Day today and All Souls Day tomorrow we try and reckon with the thought that we are indeed dust and to dust we shall return. The Hebrew word Adam comes from the word for mud or soil. But we also affirm as Christians that human beings, people of the humus can also shine with the divine light which is eternal – a place of light where 'death will be no more' and 'all things will be made new'. The recent presence of the bones of St Teresa of Liseux travelling around this country embodied for some how death could be both oh so real and yet oh so tangibly eternal. All Saints day says loudly that humans can shine with the divine! The temporal can be shot with the eternal.

In John 11 we find Jesus in this territory. He meets Mary somewhere near the tomb of her brother Lazarus, most probably on the edge of the village – that's where death is kept. She is weeping and immersed in the rituals and experience of grief. She weeps and asks why did he have to die when Jesus could have stopped it – it the why and the blame and even the guilt that surrounds just about every death. So often this cocktail then can be the source of such pain and controversy as estates and inheritance are sorted out, with so many family rows. That's partly why Gordon Arthur is going to say something about making a will at the end of this service. It's a positive part of coming to terms with our own dying and helping others to come to terms with that too.

Earlier in the gospel we are told that this is the fourth day of mourning. Jewish tradition had it that the soul eventually left the body after three days. And to make it clearer, we are told that there is already the stench of death. Martha's response is to turn to the hope of resurrection – perhaps a genuine assertion of her faith, or a pious learnt response which you have to say even if you don't really believe it. John tells of how Jesus takes that conventional hope in resurrection and personalises it saying 'everyone who lives and believes in me will never die' (11:26). If that's the case, then why are they shrouded by the trappings of death? If that's the case, why do we still have to deal with death as our unwelcome persistent guest?

John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the bible and one of the most important. Jesus wept. But the other words used to describe his reaction turns this into much more than simply Jesus weeping with those who weep. One Greek word (tarasso) means to be disturbed – it's used to describe a menacing sea. And 'en-brimo' which is used to describe in Greek that snorting noise horses make when they are out of sorts. His tears are not only tears of real emotion but he is angry and wrong footed. That's what death does. Mary and Martha understand much more than many other disciples but even they cannot comprehend the enormity of what it means to live with death now in the face of resurrection which is no longer just something that happens at the end of all things but somehow happens now in the presence of Jesus.

This resurrection in no way sidesteps death – here are tomb and body and tears and stench. The glory of God is revealed as all that is embraced fully but when thanksgiving is truly offered even then, a profound transformation is wrought. In the other gospels Jesus cries with a loud voice as he dies on the cross. Here in John, he cries with a loud voice as he opens the tomb and as he calls Lazarus by name. In the other gospels the resurrection is revealed as the tomb is opened and the cloths of death are left behind. Here we see that for us, for human beings, the tomb is opened but the bandages of death remain in evidence. In one of the strangest almost comedic stories of the bible, Lazarus shuffles out needing others to unwrap him. The actual word used (aphete) means release him. The community unwrap him and in doing so free themselves too.

It is likely that the first followers for whom this gospel was written, the Johannine community were beginning to face persecution and death because they were living as if resurrection was not just at the end but now. They were demonstrating what it means to release others into life. They were refusing to accept that the poor could be forgotten. They were setting a feast as great as Cana for all and sundry. They were uncertain about politicians or religious leaders who were expedient rather than principled. They were living as saints on earth and so they were catapulted into death by virtue of their holy unrest.

Shakespeare put it like this - 'And Death once dead, there's no more dying then'. This is the real power of All Sainstide and All Soulstide – not that death is no longer real but that this reality can be born and that we can remove and unwrap all that keeps pulling us back into a world which can only talk of death or which denies death. As we unwrap the bandages of death, we are propelled into a place which insists on life now as well as in eternity.

We are made of dust, we are
Flying on every wind,
Blown to the back of the earth
Stormed at, broken, defiled.
We are people of dust
But dust with a living mind.
Dust with a spirit, grace
Goes to the end of the earth,
Follows the dark act, the thought
Lying, wounding, distraught,
We are dust from our birth
But in that dust is wrought
A place for visions, a hope
That reaches beyond the stars,
Conjures and pauses the seas,

Elizabeth Jennings, from *Dust*

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