

DEATH IS NOTHING AT ALL?

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Five Prayers from the Cross: The Fifth Prayer

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!" And having said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:44-46)

"Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened." Thus spoke the Rev. Henry Scott Holland (1847-1918) from the pulpit of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, on May 15, 1910. Nine days earlier the popular monarch, King Edward VII, had died after suffering a series of heart attacks. All of England was consumed with grief. Holland couldn't have known it at the time, but for the next 112 years and counting, one paragraph of his sermon would be remembered and repeated to comfort those who mourn. Holland's sermon about death is entitled, "The King of Terrors," and the full paragraph reads as follows:

"Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity. What is this death but a negligible accident? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost."

Holland's imagery is enormously attractive. We would like to think that "death is nothing at all." We like to imagine that death is no more a transition than slipping into the next room. The paragraph suggests other comforting images of death. It's like watching a ship at sea heading toward the horizon. Smaller and smaller she appears until finally slipping out of sight. But why should she be out of mind because she is out of sight? Indeed, if our cry is "there she goes," those on another shore shout with joy, "here she comes!" Death is nothing at all. It is only a ship going over the horizon, or a person slipping into the next room.

We come finally to the fifth and final of the prayers that Jesus spoke from the cross: "*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!*" Many sermons on this final prayer express our hope that Jesus finally found some measure of peace after enduring unimaginable physical pain, and suffering the spiritual separation from God. In the end, we hope, Jesus was able to die as peacefully as a trusting child falls asleep in a parent's arms. Some commentators have speculated that Jesus intentionally chose these words, which we also know as Psalm 31:5, because they were part of Jewish evening prayers that began at 3:00 each afternoon. Thus, as Jews throughout the land recited this verse of the Psalm, Jesus joined in with them to signal that his death was "nothing at all," nothing more than going to sleep with faith and trust in God. And so, with these peaceful words, Jesus slips away into the next room, sails over the horizon, and teaches us all how to let go and die. "*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!*"

I'm sorry, but no. The more we look at the wider context of the fifth prayer from the cross, the less comfortable we should be with any gentle, lovely interpretation. For one thing, Jesus did not pray his final words in the barely audible tones you would expect from a dying person, or one reciting evening prayers, or one drifting off to sleep. Rather, he said them "*crying with a loud voice,*" as Luke records. The Gospel of Mark is even more at odds with the notion of a peaceful passing. Mark's Greek verb here is best translated, "to scream." Note also other signs that challenge the notion of Jesus' slipping away to a heavenly slumber. The veil of the temple was torn in two, the sun's light failed at midday, and darkness fell over the whole land. The darkness is death itself, which seeks to annihilate Jesus and all life. It is the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). So Jesus cried out, even screamed into death's dark abyss, "*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!*"

To be sure, Henry Scott Holland has been quoted out of context. His familiar words are but one paragraph of a very long sermon in which he explored several attitudes – and finally a Christian attitude – towards death, the king of terrors. Other words from different authors might be closer to the mind of Jesus in his final prayer. I think of the popular poem that Dylan Thomas wrote, some say while keeping vigil with his dying father: *Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.* I think of a frequently quoted passage near the end of Herman Melville's great novel, *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab has devoted his life to hunting the Great Whale, symbolic of death itself. In the end he is losing, yet still he shouts, "*Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee!*" We might recall the defiant words from the Burial Office in the Book of Common Prayer: "*All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*"

Have you ever ridden a large roller coaster? If you have, you know that going over the crest is a terrifying thing. Some riders lose their voice, close their eyes, and cower in fear as the descent begins. But others spread their arms wide, open their eyes, and shout defiantly for the duration of the plunge. The final prayer of Jesus was like those who scream as they go down to the dust. For Jesus, the faith in God that was removed from him is now restored. At this moment, armed with a defiant shout of praise, the King of Love stabs back at the King of Terrors. With arms spread wide, he hurtles into hell's heart crying with a loud voice his solidarity with his heavenly Father. With his last breath the Mighty Victim spits a Psalm of faith at Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God.

He descended into hell. This article of the Apostles' Creed has always lived in the margins of Christian thinking. Some have tried to do away with the whole idea of Christ's descent into hell, others haven't known what to make of it. The Scriptural support is under-whelming. The imagery is perhaps too graphic for modern minds. Nevertheless, the teaching has persisted that between his death and resurrection, Jesus undertook what has come to be called "the harrowing of hell." Jesus raided the realm of the dead, rescued those who languished therein, and then "closed the yawning gates of hell," as the Easter hymn puts it. When Jesus died he cried with a loud voice, "*Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit.*" Yes, his final prayer may have been a shout of victory and faith. But let's not forget that they were words of anguish, too. It was no lovely, gentle passing.

On Good Friday I often think about my mother. Growing up as a preacher's kid, it was expected that we would all attend church on Good Friday: Dad up in his clergy seat; Mom, my two brothers, and me out in a pew. But a three-hour service was a tough pill to swallow when we were little. Thus, my mother would plot a strategic moment when we would slip away to the outdoors. We would cross Main Street to the East Orange Diner, which served the best bacon-cheeseburger platter on this side of the heavenly banquet. "There she goes," my father must have thought from his

lofty throne as we dashed to the exit. But why should she be out of mind because she is out of sight? “Here she comes,” was probably the shout of the wait staff at the diner as we drew near.

Last August my mother’s earthly pilgrimage came to an end. She was nearly 91-years old, and a cascading series of age-related problems finally overcame her. I was able to reach her hospital bedside on a Thursday evening, in time to have a good, clear conversation with her. Nevertheless, overnight something went terribly wrong. A bacterial infection reached her brain, and when we arrived in the morning she was in a different place. Only semi-conscious, she was clearly in great pain and cried out with a loud voice, “help me, help me, help me.” By the afternoon she was comatose, and a bedside vigil began. Because of Covid restrictions only my brothers and I were allowed to keep watch. In the evenings when visiting hours ended I would think to myself “this can’t last until the morning,” but it did. Eventually my brothers and I began to take turns to spell each other, but also keep one of us at Mom’s side.

Six days later I happened to be the one there when it was clear that she would soon breathe her last. I recalled how Mom had kept vigil for her mother and was right there when my grandmother passed over from this life to the next. She reported that my grandmother lifted her head and smiled before slipping away to the next room. Frankly, I was praying that Mom might enjoy a similar epiphany at her last awakening. My hope was that if “there she goes” were my thoughts from her bedside,” then “here she comes” would be the shout of saints on another shore, and perhaps some light of recognition might pierce the gloom and register on her face.

I’m sorry, but no. My confession today is that it didn’t go that way at all. In fact, the final expression on her face was a painful grimace, not a peaceful smile. At first it made me sad that Mom died with a look of anguish, but later on a wise friend reminded me that Jesus died the same way. He who brought us out of sin into righteousness, out of error into truth, out of death to life died in great suffering. I also remembered that major life transitions were never easy for my mother. From daughter to wife, from wife to widow – these were agonizing passages for her. But she always made them, trusting in God that joy would come in the morning.

When my mother was a little girl she had a beloved dog named Daisy. She would tell the story of how Daisy became so sick one day that they weren’t sure if she would make it through the night. Apparently she had a high fever for a dog, and the vet had instructed my grandmother to break aspirin tablets into little pieces and try to feed them to Daisy. Mom was terrified that Daisy would die. That night she obtained a Bible, went to her room, and turned to a desperate form of prayer. She would let the Bible fall open to wherever it would, close her eyes and put her finger down on the page. The verse where her finger landed would be the Word of the Lord for her. All this she did, and found herself pointing to Psalm 30:6 – *weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning*. She believed that God had truly spoken to her. She took it in faith that Daisy would survive (which she did), and learned to trust in God that however dark the night of weeping might be, joy would come in the morning.

Good Friday is the night of weeping. But our hope and expectation through the Lord Jesus Christ is that soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song – even Easter: a sure and certain sign that God has fixed a day. God has fixed a day when death shall be no more, when mourning and crying and pain shall be no more, when God shall wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Then, and only then, we will know in truth the meaning of the words, “Death is nothing at all. It does not count.”