

Beyond death?

I've been thinking about death and what if anything lies beyond our last breath. I've attended a number of funerals lately, in secular and church settings, and have been privileged to lead the service for a loved member of this congregation. What I will say today will include and elaborate a little on what I said on that occasion.

It's the task of a teaching Elder or Minister of the Word in the Presbyterian tradition to teach, explore and explain the faith in words that are meaningful and credible in our day and age. It's an intellectually, spiritually and pastorally demanding task. Many of our inherited ways of believing and living (some would say most) are based on views of the universe that no longer make sense or we now know to be false. We, as a human race, know so much more than our ancestors in faith about the immensity of the universe, the intricacy of sub atomic reality, the inter-connectedness of all things, the evolving nature of life, the inner working of human consciousness. We live on the near side of Darwin, Einstein, and others who have reshaped our understanding of the world and universe in which we live. So, God-faith, deeply embedded in our being, needs to be re-expressed in every age in the light of knowledge not available to those who in earlier times wrote the Bible, shaped the creeds and wrote the big books. We share with Christians across the centuries certain basic hunches we describe as Faith: that life is a good gift, that love is the clue to living life well, that Jesus demonstrates the shape love takes in a needy society, that God is love that holds all things together and gives life meaning. Preachers in the Presbyterian tradition are charged with the responsibility of exploring how deeply held and inherited convictions like these, about life and God, may be understood in the light of contemporary knowledge about the world in which we live.

In that spirit I want to briefly explore what it might mean to declare God's love in the presence of death. I have a single focus: what happens when we die, do we live forever within God-love and how can we put our response into human words? Or to put it another way, what does it mean to trust our loved ones to God-love in the presence of death's apparent finality? It's a question that must be approached gently and tentatively. The reasons for this reticence are obvious. In a biography published in 2009, a great explorer of world religions, Huston Smith, then in his ninetieth year wrote: "People ask me, the professor of religion, 'What happens when we die?' Every time I think of the student who approached the Buddhist Zen Master. Student: 'What happens when we die?' Zen Master: 'I don't know!' Student: 'But you're a Zen Master!' Zen Master: 'True. Quite true. But I am not a dead Zen Master.'" As I am not yet a dead Minister or a dead theologian I'm unable to speak with certainty about a matter that lies beyond the reach of everyday human knowing. I can simply paddle in the shallows of the vast river of divine truth and invite you to join me. I can simply try to express in the light of contemporary knowledge what our ancestors sought to express in the light of the knowledge available to them in their day.

Humans are the only living beings we know of who know they will die and who wonder if our dying has any enduring meaning and if what we have become endures on in some form beyond death's curtain. Across the centuries communities have developed all sorts of picturesque and imaginative images of human existence beyond death. The best known

image, that of heaven and hell, suggests that death might be either welcomed or feared depending on how one has lived or believed. God is imagined as an all-knowing judge assigning those who have died to either heaven or hell depending on how they have lived. It's an image of life beyond death that belongs to a period when it was believed that the world is made of three levels – 'up', or heaven, where God lives and cares for those God loves, 'here', where we live and work and eventually die, and 'down' where the devil lives along with those who failed to live or believe well and are punished in the fires of hell. It was further believed by some that the purpose of our living was to ascertain whether we belonged for eternity in Heaven (up) or in Hell (down). It's a dreadful belief, that has caused unnecessary anxiety and fear to many people and denies the universality of divine love. It is based on what scholars in earlier generations believed about the universe. I have a book, 'Visions of heaven and Hell' made up of artistic imaginings of heaven and hell. The imagined suffering of those who messed up in life is grotesque, some of them like a mirror image of the suffering of the poor in the time of the artist. The imagined pleasures of those in heaven reflect the pleasures and privileges of the upper class. Heaven and hell imagery and its literal interpretations of death has done enough harm to the human community. It's well past time to lock it away in the attic of doctrines that no longer make sense -that must be re-expressed in the light of contemporary knowledge. An increasing number of contemporary people weary of heaven and Hell imagery, Christians among them, assume that death signals the end of personal human existence. Death= finish, full stop. I'm going to suggest a different, and I hope more Christian approach to death in the presence of God-love, and a view that I hope is more consistent with what we know today about the nature of physical and spiritual reality. But before I do that there's another stop to make.

The cynic might say that even to ask the question of life beyond breathing, speaking and thinking, is a form of wishful thinking or a conceited and selfish attempt to claim more lasting significance for ourselves than is appropriate. Yet there's a deep-seated intuition within the human heart that cries out that there is 'more' to life than our years of conscious living. The intuition takes many forms: a sense that our loved ones still accompany us through life's journey, reports from near death experiences, a deeply felt sense that faith reaches toward a fulfillment beyond what life has brought us. Our memories of those we have loved can have an intensity about them that is more like an experience of their continuing presence. I don't think we can ignore these experiences and intuitions. They're too persistent. They belong in every culture and every religion.

At the funeral service for Ken Aldred, I included these words written some time ago by me and which I've used on other occasions:

"There's a question asked by all the great religions: what does all our living add up to – all the effort, the struggles, the prayers, the fumbling attempts to serve the truth, build peace and create a just world? Wise people have crafted stories and theologies to penetrate more deeply into this mystery of human living and dying. The question does not go away: does all we do have any enduring significance? Perhaps we can say something like this: we live in an interconnected world – life is like a net that holds us all together in the bundle of life and within that living network there is God (or perhaps with me you might like to say there is God-love) – rather like the glue that holds it all together. When death comes we remain within that interconnected network of love and energy. All that we have been and are becoming is held

within the memory of God, participates in the very being of God. Every act of love, every dream of what might be, every attempt to build peace, every expression of compassion, lives on within the creating and energising love of God. As part of God's ever present and ever active love those who have died contribute to the healing and enrichment of our world. "

In 1995 Catholic theologian, John Tully Carmody, died after a long battle with cancer. He left behind a poetic meditation and diary he kept during that difficult period. At one stage he wrote words that resonated within me some years ago during a time of family bereavment 3 and that you also might find helpful:

"We are small people, God,
As easily rolled up and crushed as paper.
The longest of our lives
Does not last one of your seconds.
Hold us close then in your meaning
Lest we feel terribly badly made.
Help us to believe
deep in our souls
that you have purpose for our dying
and you let nothing decent be lost."

That's it: nothing is lost. Each of us throw our best gifts into the pool of life and contribute what we can to keep life sweet – hospitable, just, generous, truthful, accepting of others and sharing what we have with others....and none of this lost...it's our ongoing and everlasting contribution to life's evolving beauty. All that we have been and are is woven into the everlasting fabric of life. Nothing is lost.

The emphasis is not on our intrinsic immortality but rather on our participation in the everlastingness of God. We cannot see beyond our final breath and we are wise not to say too much. It's enough to live within a gentle confidence that God's love surrounds both our living and our dying and through our continuing participation in the love of God we and those we love continue to contribute to the healing and enrichment of the world. The apostle Paul declared that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God. Perhaps it's all we need to know or say as we grieve the death of a friend or wonder about our own dying.

My own view is that the continuing creative and energising work of God is of far more significance than the continuation of me as an individual. If there be any significance in our living it is that we contributed in some way to the ongoing healing and creating work of God. Embraced within God-love we continue beyond death to contribute to the healing work of God in a troubled world. We live on in the enduring memory and the everlasting love of God.

Will we exist as a personal and distinct entity beyond death? Who knows? Those who've loved deeply ask if they will meet again with those they've loved and valued. Who knows? What we can say is that no one of us exists in life as a person independently of those we have loved and who have loved us. Is the same true of our continuing life within the love of

God? Is there a sense in which the human connectedness that has sustained and shaped us in life continues beyond our death and as part of our participation in the life and love of God? Questions without final answers! Clearly, I've gone well beyond the boundaries of what can be known or spoken by someone who is not yet a dead Buddhist Zen Master or a dead Christian preacher! It's time to be silent before the reality and the mystery of death. And to whisper yet again, 'nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God.'