



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SERMON FOR PAUL BALMFORTH

John 11:21–27 [Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’]

If you grew up in and were shaped by the England of the 20th century as Paul was, you didn’t have to be a regular Sunday churchgoer later in life to have a deep familiarity with the words of the liturgies of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In the post-war years of Paul’s youth, I’m sure the first words of the anthem that opened this liturgy were as familiar to him as the words of William Blake’s *Jerusalem*.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet he shall live. And whoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.

These words from the Gospel of John, surely evocative in the language of the 1662 Prayer Book (England’s prayer book still), would have marked key moments of Paul’s own young life, as

well as key moments in the civic and cultural life of the nation as they unfolded around him. The words themselves a part of the stuff of life, holding space for faith in the imaginations of those who repeatedly heard them, these words becoming bound in relationship with their hearers, reliably framing times of grief with an expression of hope through faith. These words, repeated through the centuries, absorbed, their meaning felt and found in lives lived and in the love of those who made their mark on each passing generation, in the stories of lives woven together through time. This grand story of life lived is where and how the Truth and mystery of these words, of our faith, is best explained. And Paul now is a part of that story.

The 1662 English Prayer Book has been described as one of the most extraordinary books in history. The preface to my edition says that “Human life in the English

imagination is mediated through [the book’s] idiom. ... In the breadth of its practical influence, Prayer Book prose has seeped into the collective consciousness more profoundly than that of any other book written in English.”¹

In addition to the power of the Prayer Book’s prose, I believe it’s fair to say that the liturgical curation of Scripture in the Book of Common Prayer has, over more than 300 years of English life, has become a kind of faith-based rebar, it has reinforced faith within English culture for centuries. The Prayer Book giving language for moments of joy and celebration, and for times of pain and grief and loss. It accompanies us as we walk the Way through life, together. The resonant language of the Prayer Book has kept a sometimes hidden, sometimes even buried faith yet present in the shared experience of a culture.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, Ed. Brian Cummings, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011), ix

So it seems it may have been for Paul. Nancy drawn to him straight away as he described himself as lapsed C of E, that is: lapsed Church of England. That Nancy knew what he meant by that particular idiom, “lapsed CofE”, here in Seattle, a long way from England, is miracle enough, that they were gloriously compatible, sharing a mutual love of all things English, including the Prayer Book and its liturgies, and especially Evensong, was surely proof indeed of the promise of new life made real through love, by way of a faith well-planted though hidden.

Just as we come to know something of the love of God from the love we experience and share in this life, so too we might learn something of the mystery of the resurrection from the unexpected and beautiful new life that arises from our faith, even a faith not consciously acknowledged for many years.

The genius of the Prayer Book, and our practice of praying our faith, means that Paul, though once self-described as lapsed CofE, growing up he would

have heard scripture in his everyday life, around and about him, those repeated words at important times becoming a part of his being even though they may not have been an ever present part of his thinking. The Prayer Book was conceived, after all, so we might soak up Scripture and prayer, be changed by our intimacy with the words, whether we notice or not, whether we intellectually understand how and why or not. Faith does not make its prime place in the intellect, but in our bodies, within our cultural experience, in our emotional attachments, it's place is in our lives lived in the world, together. This is what we are called to believe.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet he shall live. And whoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.

Some things just cannot be known satisfactorily, they are simply best felt, sensed bodily, deeply, across the years and through life's many, many experiences. The great mystery of the resurrection, the great mystery of faith

impossible truly to know, but over a lifetime ... more appreciated, perhaps, especially as new love brings with it new life.

Celebrating the Eucharist, in the last weeks of Paul's life, when we were three gathered together in Jesus' name and truly felt that Holy presence, Paul welcomed the weight, the feel of the prayer book in his hands; although speaking and responding very little, if at all, his mouth would move as we spoke aloud the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer, at the words of administration his hands instinctively formed a cradle for the bread, he stood before receiving the chalice and making the sign of the cross on his body.

Ours is an embodied faith, a faith of life, and Paul's body was infused over a lifetime by the words of our tradition in the Scripture and the prayers of the BCP which continued their journey faithfully with him through those last weeks. It was to familiar words, which have carried through the centuries by our prayer book that Paul died. ... and it is to share in the eternal life of the prayers given voice by this book that we gather today, in love overflowing, to celebrate the gift of Paul's life, the gift of life that was his love to those closest and dearest to him.

Always a Yorkshireman, always an Englishman ... Paul was also always a Christian.