

Grace Notes Friday, April 30, 2021 ¹



Dear friends:

Here we are at the last day of April, starting to see some real signs of new life which are staying and not being scared away by temperature dips. This is what Easter is all about! New Life, new hope, new faith.

As I looked over the readings for today, I found myself getting lost in John 14:1-6. Quite ironically, I was reading this at my stepfather's bedside in the hospital a few years ago as he, an avowed agnostic, breathed his last and slipped away. After a few minutes of just sitting, I went to find a staff member and finally tracked down a cleaner who went to the cafeteria to find a nurse. I reflected frequently, that, had I not been there to sit with him, he would have died alone and perhaps have been alone for some time. It may be that the isolation imposed by the pandemic has made me conscious of some of the ways we have taken for granted to be together, and one of these instances is death. We are aware that many people have died in the last year, unable to have a family member with them, and for many people in our culture, people die in hospital or a nursing home, either with medical personnel or monitoring equipment for company. I started thinking back to the first death I can remember, that of my grandfather's younger brother, when I was about seven years old and living with my grandparents.

I had no idea that day what was up but just knew it had to be important, as we were going somewhere in the car and my grandfather had taken a day off work. We arrived at the house where I, given the usual admonition to stay out of the way and be quiet (the age of "children should be seen and not heard"), noticed the plain wooden casket supported by two chairs, containing the deceased, his eyes covered with the large, old British pennies. Shortly thereafter, the men shouldered the coffin and led the way to the kirk; a short service ensued after which the casket was lifted again and carried out to the graveyard behind the church, lowered into the grave, the earth shovelled in by the male family members.



¹ Sculpture - Triumph by Timothy P. Schmalz

Then we returned to the house for high tea. I need to explain here that “high tea”, unlike the afternoon tea of scones (rhymes with gone!), dainty sandwiches and little cakes, is a meal – usually fish and chips, salmon or ham and salad or a meat pie, served at about five in the evening. Elderly, lonely people in the parish would often go to a funeral just to be able to get a decent meal and some company.

It strikes me that our present-day, urban death practices deprive us of many of the ways in which our forebears dealt with their grief: sitting with the dying person, washing and dressing them after death, having the body in the house and then carrying it – sometimes a conveyance was necessary – to the church and graveyard all had an intimacy we no longer experience. As the majority of people at the funeral would have been very familiar with the rites and hymns, participating in the religious rituals was



familiar and comforting. The grave was in the churchyard of the place in which family worshipped, and people often had picnics in the cemetery on Sunday afternoons. Prince Philip’s funeral had many of these elements albeit conducted with more ceremony than most of us will enjoy and far more media presence than we would find comfortable. Some of our most beautiful music is written for funerals! Note the Alleluia in this Kontakion from the Orthodox tradition <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvwW5ju6PH8>

Among my favourite liturgical pieces are forms of the Song of Farewell; here are two: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X25XhacPJF0> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBYvQ-uOijS>

As Catholic Christians it is important for us to remember, even as we grieve, what Jesus has promised us in his Resurrection and which we continue to celebrate in this Easter Season. It continues to be a time for us to proclaim joyful alleluias, to greet each other “Christ is risen!” and respond “Indeed he is risen!”

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55)

To return to John’s gospel, Jesus told us “...if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.” How beautiful and reassuring that is!

Wishing you a beautiful Sabbath and week to follow,

Gillian