

Southwark Cathedral, 17 May 2013

A Service of Thanksgiving for those who have donated their bodies for Medical Education, Training and Research

Reading: John 21.15-19

The Christian faith began with Mary Magdalene and the disciples going to the empty tomb on Easter Day and finding Christ had risen. A burial on the same day as the death is not your experience, let alone a grave to go three days later. For those who gave their bodies for medical education, training and research, there is no place to which you can return, at least not for a long while after their death. But there is the hope that the gift of a body will help give life to others, and for that there is much thanksgiving.

Before becoming Bishop of Salisbury I was Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, London's parish church, which the previous Dean of Southwark mischievously called the Southwark Cathedral of the North Bank. If you are familiar with London you will know the blue plaques that mark the homes of famous people. You see them all over the place. One of my favourites is in Great Windmill Street, on the side of Lyric Theatre on the edge of Soho:

This was the home and museum of
Dr William Hunter
1718-1783
Anatomist

It is next door to a night club advertising "over 100 international nude dancers". I wonder if Dr Hunter would feel at home?

There's anxiety about what happens when we die with questions about eternity: what lasts forever and is eternal? Faith, hope and love (*1 Corinthians 13*)? Will our bodies be respected and will what is done be in keeping with the wishes of the person who died? It's the same in life. Bodies sell cheap in the Soho market. At least in life we can actively negotiate and make choices about what we want for ourselves. Giving your body to others in death requires trust not just in individuals but in the culture, in a professional practice and code of ethics.

Burial is no guarantee of being dealt with respectfully. Dr William Hunter was one of the founders of the science of anatomy. His brother John Hunter was the founder of scientific surgery. They are remembered by The Royal College of Surgeons at the Hunterian Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields which is currently marking its bicentenary. Both Hunters were buried: William in St James' Piccadilly and John in the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields. Additional burial vaults were created at St Martin's by the distinguished architect John Nash. In the 1820's they were state of the art care of the dead. London was so pleased with them that The Times reported the weekend before they were opened for the cold corpses to inhabit that people were allowed to perambulate them by candlelight. By 1848 the conditions in these vaults were so disgusting, with rats running in and out of the decomposing bodies, that the church authorities ordered the vaults to be bricked up because of the health risks to the living around the church. In the 1850's they began to be cleared, the human remains being taken to burial grounds in the suburbs of Camden and Brookwood Park. A careful search was made for Dr John Hunter's coffin. It took sixteen days to find it.

Hunter was so highly esteemed that he was reburied in Westminster Abbey on the north side of the nave close to the grave of Ben Johnson. A memorial brass was placed on the floor:

The Royal College of Surgeons of England have placed this tablet over the grave of Hunter, to record their admiration of his genius as a gifted interpreter of the Divine Power and Wisdom at work in the Laws of Organic Life, and their grateful veneration for his services to mankind as the Founder of Scientific Surgery.

It was at last a fitting end.

The care of the dead was one of the things that marked out Christians in the earliest times. Christians distinctively protected the weak at the beginning of life -weak infant boys, or healthy strong girls, were not left on the hillside to die. In keeping with the Gospels of Jesus Christ, Christians cared for the sick and lame. A tradition developed from the life of the Church of hospices that became hospitals. You can see it in the names of some of London's great teaching hospitals: St Bartholomew's, St Thomas's and Guy's Hospital was founded in 1721 by Thomas Guy, a publisher of unlicensed Bibles who had made his money in the South Sea Bubble and established a hospital for incurables discharged from St Thomas's. Hospitals of Christian foundation developed the science of medicine which cured the sick and restored life.

In keeping with a memory of the empty tomb on Easter Day, and with the experience of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians often worshipped in the places where the dead were buried. They changed the town planning of Rome, the dead being buried at the churches rather than outside the city. For Christians the tombs of the saints and of our loved ones are thin places where heaven and earth seem very close. Still today people go to graves to remember and feel close to people we loved and who loved us. At the grave we sense both time and eternity.

The gift of a body is precious in life and death. Whether it is used to teach students who will become surgeons or to do research that will help our understanding, cure disease and improve the quality of life, the gift of a body is immensely valuable. A person is of infinite worth. Whatever our own beliefs, this service is within the life of the church. We have come to remember and to give thanks for people we loved, an extraordinary number of them. Loving in the particular is how in life we learn to love more generally. We hope that the gift of their body will give life to others.

Death for the elderly at the end of a long life well lived can itself be a blessing. Sudden death, especially for the younger, rarely seems so friendly. Some relationships end before they are complete and we feel torn asunder. Others carry the guilt of things said or done, or not said and not done. The memories we bring are very varied, but we hope this service is a comfort to the bereaved and a thanksgiving for a life and for life in all its fullness.

The stories of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels are often brief moments of recognition which change lives forever. In the events that led to the crucifixion, the disciples let their Lord down. One betrayed him; another denied him; under pressure, all of them fled. In the resurrection of Christ fractured relationships are mended and restored. Peter, who had denied three times that he even knew Jesus, saw the risen Christ back by the Sea of Galilee where they first met and where he was called to leave his boats and his nets and follow him. Three times, Jesus asked him: Peter do you love me more than these, do you love me, do

you really love me? Peter's threefold reply is increasingly emphatic, "Yes Lord you know I love you", as though cancelling the denials. It allows him to get on, start again, begin a new life in the resurrection of Christ and be sent out to share in the work of God that took him to Rome and to face his own death.

Something similar has happened for you and your relatives. In a straightforwardly scientific way, death has not had the last word. Something new is possible and life is being remade and restored.

Thanks be to God for all those whom we remember today. We give thanks that their bodies are of such great value and may their memories always be a blessing to us, which in this cathedral church we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen