



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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In Memoriam David Ridgley Riley

1947 ✣ 2017

Saturday in the Fifth Week After the Epiphany, February 11th 2017

**¤ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ¤**

God's gift of life, for Christians at least, comes with two decidedly disconcerting conditions attached. The first was laid down by Jesus Christ, himself, when he declared: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

By this he means that we can enjoy life to the full only if we are willing to share it – in short to give it away to our fellow men. Jesus is telling us that a life lived selfishly is a life thrown away. Life is a gift God intended to bless not only its direct recipients, but to enrich a whole host of others: family, friends, neighbors and colleagues.

Indeed, the theme running throughout Holy Scripture – from the Torah to the Gospels – is that God created us as social beings, and intended that we should derive our greatest satisfaction from life when contributing to the wellbeing and welfare of others.

The great rabbi Hillel the Elder, for example, was challenged by an ill-mannered Roman soldier to explain the Torah in a matter of seconds. He replied: "Do nothing that is hateful to you or your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary upon it; go and learn." Jesus put it even more emphatically: "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Measured against this yardstick, we can say with certitude that David lived his life to the full. He shared it generously not only with his friends, pupils, choristers and colleagues, but, through his music, with the whole community. He was a faithful friend, a fine musician and demanding but kindly teacher.

He was also a man of strong opinions – occasionally

about subjects with which he was not entirely familiar. At times such as this, a conversation with David could be reminiscent of the "Argument Sketch" from Monty Python's Flying Circus. But it was very hard to resent this, because he was manifestly having such a good time cranking you up.

To say David will be missed is an understatement. No matter how you cut it, he was so vibrant, so full of life that his death, a year just shy of 70, seems desperately unfair. And it's at times like this we are tempted to blame God for letting such bad things happen to the nicest of people.

But then, such is the human condition, we habitually blame God for an awful lot of things that aren't in anyway his fault – the work of the devil, the work of our own hands, or simply the fallen nature of the world in which we live.

We seldom pause to think that if God were to intervene like Superman every time something terrible happened to nice people he would rob us of the thing that is the very essence of our humanity – our freedom of will.

If God were to intervene every time something went wrong we would have no alternative but to obey his every command – to all intents and purposes we would be little more than robots. Obedience compelled does not inspire love, and – because that is his very nature – it is our love that he wants above all things.

Rather than constantly intervene in our affairs, what God, in his love, does for us – if, indeed, we will

allow him – is to take all the evil, hurtful things that befall us and make them not just for the better, but for the very best. And this brings us to the second condition attached to God's gift of life. Paradoxically, perhaps, in order to enjoy life forever we are obliged to give it back to our creator.

This is a condition human beings find desperately hard to understand. Even Martha and Mary, two of our Lord's closest friends, had trouble accepting it. When their brother Lazarus fell seriously ill they summoned Jesus immediately. However it took him five days to arrive, and, by the time he finally turned up, Lazarus was dead and in his grave, and the sisters were beside themselves with fury.

At first Jesus tried to comfort them with the words you heard at the beginning of the service: "*I am the resurrection and life, he that believeth in me though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*"

But the sisters weren't at all satisfied with this message. They knew their brother had eternal life, but they wanted him in the here and now. They wanted to enjoy his company on earth, and they didn't see what was so unreasonable about it. After all, they'd actually witnessed Jesus raise people from dead – most of them, they felt, were far less deserving than Lazarus.

Jesus went on to summon Lazarus back to life. But before that, he did something described in the shortest verse in the New Testament; just two words: "Jesus wept." Why did he weep? It couldn't have been because he was uncertain that he could perform the miracle. He had done so many times.

Actually, the reason Jesus wept was because he was calling Lazarus back from the most joyous experience he had ever known. If coming back to work from a glorious vacation in, say, Hawaii or Palm Beach is a real downer, coming back from Paradise is infinitely worse!

People in this age of laptops, i-Phones and the Internet seem to find it difficult to grasp the concept of heaven. And things aren't much helped by the fact that artists still portray heaven the way they did in the Middle Ages – as a place populated by folks dressed in flowing robes and halos. The notion of David with a halo like a dinner plate on his head, sitting on a

cloud, twanging a harp is really quite delicious. But I digress . . .

Bizarre though the visions of those long dead painters might seem, people back in the Middle Ages understood something about the nature of faith that many us have forgotten today: It is not necessary for us to understand how God works – what makes him tick – in any technical or scientific sense. All we need to know is that God is in control at all times.

Sometimes God acts in ways we can understand; ways we inadequately call "the Laws of Nature." Sometimes he does things in a manner that is entirely outside our realm of understanding. And this we call the miraculous. Heaven is now quite beyond our understanding. One day we shall understand. But, then, we shall understand everything else as well so it won't seem that important.

For the time being, we are – as St. Paul put it – like little children trying to puzzle out shapes and shadows in an old and faded mirror. And, for the moment, we shall have to be satisfied with that.

There is, however, nothing new or novel about God's promise of everlasting life; the life David is now enjoying. It was promised to us at the very dawn of our history, in one of the oldest books of the Bible.

Long before Jesus came down from heaven, Job knew God's promise of eternal life. You heard his words at the beginning of the service: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God."

Death, you see, confronts us with the greatest of all God's mysteries. It is not the creation of heaven and earth and all that therein is. It isn't the Virgin Birth or even the Resurrection. God's greatest mystery is best explained by St. John who wrote: "So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." *AMEN.*

May David's soul, with the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest ✕ in peace, and light perpetual shine upon him. AMEN