**PREPARING FOR DEATH**

**Sermon preached at 10.30am Sung Eucharist**

**St. Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Sunday 12 September 2021**

As you know, our friend Susie Sloane’s funeral is on the 21st September. The shock of her death, not knowing about her illness has left us stunned. I’ve noticed in myself that feeling that somehow illness and death are not how things are meant to be. I know that people get ill and die, but still I resist.

Reflecting on these things I’ve remembered story I’ve told before. A powerful story that’s worth hearing again. There was once a mother of a young son who was the sunshine of her day. Tragically, he had hardly grown big enough to run and play when he died. The mother's sorrow was so great that she would not accept his death. She took to the streets, carrying the dead son on her hip. She went from house to house asking for medicine for her son. People thought she was mad and tried to tell her there is no medicine.

But a wise woman in the monastery above the town understood the mother's sorrow. When she came knocking on the monastery door, the wise woman said "This is what you must do. You must go to each house in the town and fetch tiny grains of mustard seed.  But not just any house will do.  You must take mustards seeds only from those houses in which no one has ever died." The mother was delighted at the thought that there was medicine for her son so off she went back to the town. At the first house she knocked and asked for tiny grains of mustard seed. When the people brought her some she added "Tell me, is this a house in which no one has died?" "Oh no," the people said, "the dead from this house are beyond counting." "Then I must go elsewhere" the mother declared. On she went from house to house, but always the same answer. In the whole town there was no house that death had not touched. And at last she understood why she had been sent on this hopeless mission. Carrying her son, she walked out of the town to the cemetery and there she gave him up.

Returning to the monastery, she was greeted by the wise woman who smiled gently and asked "did you fetch the tiny grains of mustard seed from the house without death, as I told you?" The mother answered "Most holy one, there are no houses where death and suffering are not known.  All people are touched by death and loss. My own dear son is dead. I see now that whoever is born must die. There is no medicine for this but accepting it.  There is no cure, but knowing. Thank you." And she returned to her home. [[1]](#footnote-1)

You may have seen the documentary on iPlayer about the monks of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire: “Brotherhood. The Inner Life of Monks”. If you haven’t, watch it as soon as you can.

And not just because you learn about the monastery opening a brewery. Or see a monk taking his vows and entering the community with great joy. During the film we see Brother Liam. His elderly and frail, receiving end of life care. Lying on his bed, it’s an effort to speak. He says, “Now, I’m at the end of my life, soon I will die. All my life, all that I am, I offer to God, and present it to him. This is all I have, this is all I have to give. Everything now is just for God.”

We then hear from Brother Paul. He is older too and speaks openly about how his memory has started to fail. He has dementia. Then he says, “I’m not so bad. I have a lot to be thankful for. God wants me in his way, not in my way. I’m in God’s hands now. Perhaps in a bigger way than I would be otherwise.”

At the end of the film we see the burial of one of the monks. The grave is dug. The body lies in the chapel in an open coffin. After the funeral procession to the graveside and the wrapped body is laid in the ground. Brother Tim, a young postulant says, “All the monks are preparing for that moment when they die. That’s what we are here for, we are preparing for a good death. And you do get the sense that all the monks are kind of saying, ‘Well done, you made it, you persevered to the end.’” There is a sense of deep peace and joy.

You don’t need to be a monk or a nun to prepare for a good death. Last weekend I was part of a good death. Some of you know my mother-in-law, Angela, had been living with cancer for several years. She took the opportunity to prepare well for her death. She made practical preparations so that we knew she wanted to die at home. She left clear instructions for her funeral. She made spiritual preparations by looking her mortality in the eye. She worked hard on accepting that she would die. and she talked about that. This included admitting she wasn’t in control, being open to mystery and accepting how there is so much we don’t know. Also, she tried to embrace the whole experience, to welcome everything and push away nothing. These are deep and challenging, but Angela found an inner freedom and a lightness of being. “For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, yes.”

And so, ten days ago, when her health declined rapidly, she was ready. Last weekend Angela was asleep under medication as family and close friends visited to say goodbye. On Sunday afternoon we realised it was time to let her go. Angela died early on Monday morning peacefully at home with her cat at her side, just as she had courageously planned. Soon after there was a beautiful sunrise over the beach in Aldeburgh. Kate says it was perfect.

Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and die. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life … will find it.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

*Canon Matthew Vernon*

*Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*

1. Adapted from *A Tale from The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* in “Spiritual Formation – Following the Movements of the Spirit” by Henri Nouwen with Michel J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird p.37-39 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 8.35 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)