

‘Death be not proud’

The title is from a poem by John Donne (1573-1631).

Death intimidates humanity. Obviously we do not enjoy the deaths of friends and loved ones, even less when those deaths are painful or otherwise distasteful. But neither do we not know how to handle it.

Quote from Stanley Hauerwas:¹ Speaking of the ‘power’ which medicine has in our modern western society:

It is a mistake ... to blame physicians for having such power over our lives. They simply reflect who we are. In many ways those in medicine suffer from our determination to redescribe our lives in the language of sickness. For example, we now expect doctors that keep us alive to the point that when we die we do not have to know we’re dying. We then get to blame doctors for keeping us alive no point. Physicians as a result are sued for doing too much or too little to ‘cure us’, because they now serve patients who have no sense of the limits of medicine. Patients have forgotten what every doctor knows, namely, that the final description for every patient for which a physician cares is “dead”.

And also today, we try to avoid the reality of death by pretending that it is something we can celebrate. Funerals become ‘celebrations of the life of ...’ rather than an exposé of the horror of death.

Heb. 2:15 The fear of death.

Quote from Paul Tillich:²

We are slaves of fear, not because we have to die, but because we deserve to die!

Romans 6:1-11 Baptised into Christ’s death.

¹ ‘Sinsick’ in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Eds), *Sin, Death and the Devil*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 9f.

² ‘The Destruction of Death’ in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1949, p. 170-173.

1 Cor. 15:54-57 The final confrontation!

1 Cor. 15:26 ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’. **Rev. 20:14** ‘Then death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire’.

Phil. 1:20-23 All fear is gone

John Dunn,³ a friend who died of Motor Neurone Disease in 2012 and with whom, because he had no family, I stayed till he could breathe no more, wrote:

With failing memory and poor eyesight [John] Newton continued to faithfully preach into his eighties. One Sunday after he had rambled on for fifty minutes, a friend commented, ‘His understanding is in ruins—yet its very ruins are precious, and bits you pick up retain their intrinsic value, beauty and richness.’

The time came when Newton was so blind that he could not even see his text and it became more and more obvious that preaching was a task that was way beyond him. But he was indignant when it was hinted that he should give it up. ‘What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can still speak?’

But in October 1806 he mounted the pulpit for the last time. As it was, the poor old man completely forgot what he was preaching about and someone was obliged to enter the pulpit to remind him of the subject!

He was now very frail, though not ill or in any pain. Just old. To a friend he wrote, ‘I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post.’ And to another he said, ‘I am like a person going on a journey in a stage coach, who expects its arrival every hour, and is frequently looking out at the window for it.’

The coach came on the 21st December 1807. He was 82.

³ *A Biography of John Newton*, N.C.P.I., Blackwood, n.d., p. 37