

FATHERHOOD, FREEWILL AND FAITH

[TEXT OF AN ADDRESS TO THE CAMROSE BRANCH OF THE FULL GOSPEL BUSINESSMEN'S ASSOCIATION AT CAMROSE, ALBERTA, ON 10 NOVEMBER, 1989, BY MARTIN HATTERSLEY, HON. ASSISTANT PRIEST, ST. PETER'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, EDMONTON.]

[This message was given in response to an invitation from the Camrose Full Gospel Businessmen's Association, at a dinner about fifteen months after Cathy's murder]

Thank you so much for asking me to share my story with you tonight. I am happy to see so many of you here, and extra tables being brought in. I do want to apologize to your President, Alan Brager, because I hesitated for some time after receiving his invitation to speak to you tonight, without saying "yes" or "no", before saying that I would come. That is always an awkward thing for speakers to do to people running meetings of this kind.

My reason for hesitating was this. November 10th is my birthday. It is a birthday that I share with my daughter Cathy Greeve, who was murdered in a subway station on the Edmonton L.R.T. just over a year ago. So today is rather a special day, and it carries some bitter-sweet memories. Forgive me, then, if what I say tonight is a little bit personal.

Let me start by giving you some background about my own spiritual life. I was born in England in 1932, and brought up in a good religious home as a regular attender at the Anglican church. I went to a boarding school where religious instruction was a regular part of the curriculum, and daily Chapel was the routine. I did well in my studies, and ended up with a Scholarship to Cambridge University. In those days, shortly after World War II, all young men reaching 18 were drafted for two years of military service, so after completing school I was drafted as a rather reluctant soldier, along with a good number of other rather reluctant soldiers, into the Royal Artillery.

In the stress and loneliness of Army life, I found myself disappointed that the religion I had been brought up with didn't really seem very helpful. However, I do remember from that period that we had two young Bombardiers with us, unashamed members of the Salvation Army. They stood out in our rather demoralized regiment as stable, cheerful and reliable soldiers, no matter what was asked of them: glowing with a sort of inner glow that I wished I had had myself. It was a very powerful testimony.

When I went up to the University with my full time service completed, one of the first people to greet me was an friend from my old school. In my room that evening he asked me a question that puzzled and rather insulted me - "Are you a Christian?" I said I thought I was. He went on to ask: "But do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?" That was something new to me, and I didn't really know what he meant. So he went on to talk about talking to Jesus, confessing my sins, accepting his forgiveness, and asking him to take charge of my life. So that is what I did.

From that day on, I was very surprised to find a number of things changing. Verses in the Bible started to jump off the page and talk to me as if they had been printed in three dimensions. I started sleeping very well at night. I started a habit of a "quiet time" with God each day which I have maintained ever since, and which has done more than anything else in my life to keep me sane. I began to realize that for years, while I thought I had been looking for God, I had been deliberately turning my back on him so that I wouldn't see him. Finding God was not a matter of searching any farther. It just meant turning around and starting to talk face to face with Jesus as a person. He'd been there all the time!

Since then, I have been busy around the church in many ways. I directed church choirs for many years - that was where I met my wife after coming to Canada in 1956. I was a lay reader and a delegate to the General Synod of the Anglican Church - which was where I met a group involved in the Baptism of the Spirit. In 1972 I was asked by the Bishop of Edmonton to allow myself to be ordained as a Priest "in secular employment". I have had a very fulfilling ministry acting as an assistant priest in various ways ever since that time. In the secular world, as many of my friends here will know, I have earned my living as a lawyer, and worked hard also in the political field in the Social Credit party, without, I am afraid, having too much to show for it all.

Florence and I were married on September 1956. We had three children, all daughters. Catherine was born on my birthday in 1958: Nancy when I was working for Social Credit leader Robert Thompson in Ottawa in 1963, and Janet after we returned to Edmonton, in 1966. All three of them are graduates of the Baptist Leadership Training School in Calgary, where they went after finishing their Grade XII. Both Cathy and Nancy were Valedictorians. Cathy was married, with two young boys, Jonathan and Rowan. She and her husband Tony were people who loved the Lord, and had a real music ministry, singing at weddings in particular: many of the songs on the sheet we have used tonight carry the sort of message she loved to sing about. She was a person who bore many of the problems of life - including not the least a shortage of money, with a happy laugh. She was very much appreciated and valued in the positions she held in the work place. And she it was who was very suddenly taken away from us by this murder on August 3rd., 1988.

It is almost impossible for me to describe to you just what a blow a sudden loss like this is to a family. Some of you, I am sure, have experienced losses in your own lives, and you will know what I mean. None of us can tell ahead of time when such a loss will happen. What I'd like to do in the time I have with you is to share some of the spaces I have been in and the thoughts I have had since then, trying to reconcile this loss with my faith in a loving God whose will in the end controls the Universe.

I would like to think of this under three headings: Firstly, the Fatherhood of God: Secondly, the Free Will that God has given us, and finally, the effect of all of this on our Faith.

The Fatherhood of God

Jesus teaches us that God is our Father. When we are little children, we have a very different idea of fatherhood from when we are grown up. To a three year old child, fathers are very big, very strong, sometimes very frightening. There is nothing a father cannot do. If we ask father for anything, he can provide it. If he doesn't do it, it's not because he's got other things to do, but because he can't hear us or he doesn't like us. That's the child's view. Many people share this rather childish view of what God the Father is like. If things go wrong, then, it isn't because God has other plans and considerations that are more important than our bodily comfort. We think it's because Father either doesn't care, has no power, or has deliberately let us down.

As we get older, get married, have children, we realize that being a father is not quite that easy. There's bills to pay, income to be earned, a job to be found, a boss to be kept happy, demands on our time in filling the needs of others: working hours and conditions that sometimes place limits on our family life. There's training and responsibility in bringing children up - teaching them to wait, to share, to study, to help around the home. There's times when our children disappoint us, fail, need discipline, or need encouragement. Being a father is not an easy task!

The Father Jesus talks about is much more the way that adults know Fathers really are. Jesus speaks of fathers who are worried, or who are betrayed. There is the father who had a son who was asked to do some work: his son said he would, and never did it. There is the father whose son took half the family

fortune, wasted it all, and then came back home broke and asked for a job. That father had another son who broke his father's heart because he would not forgive his wastrel brother for what he had done. There are kings who entrust great riches to servants who betray them. One king, in particular, is a father who rents out his vineyards to tenants and sends his servants to collect the rent, and they are mistreated and driven away. In the end, he sends his only son, thinking that they would reverence him - and they kill him, wanting the vineyard all to themselves. That is the picture Jesus gives us of God the father, and of the way people, and often religious people, have behaved to him.

It's a thing I see in my own law practice - respectable middle aged clients, who would never in their lives get in trouble with the law, shamefacedly coming into my office, needing the services of a lawyer, because their young children have wrecked the car, got impaired, been caught shoplifting, or something similar that brings the whole family into disrepute. They are ready to pay the price to have the problem put right. God is that kind of a father, too. Jesus says that *"He who has seen me, has seen the Father"*. God isn't some kind of Roman Emperor, allowing his Son to die while sitting unmoved on his throne. He is a broken hearted father, having given everything for the good of his children, and received so little by way of love, obedience and thanks from them in return. When, on the evening of August 3rd., in the basement of the house where Tony and Cathy had been living, the police broke the news to us that Catherine was dead, Tony had his pastor come over. Thank God that he spoke to us then about the Cross. That way, God becomes to us not an unfeeling tyrant, whose commands have taken away someone very dear to us. He is one who has himself lived through the loss of His son. He shares our broken heartedness at the wickedness of mankind. We share his sufferings and his loss.

Freewill

Why, then, does God our Father allow such terrible things to happen to us? The answer comes, surprisingly enough, in the depth of his love. God loves mankind so much that he won't say "no" to us. He has given us Free Will. The world didn't stop in the days following Cathy's death. In my duties as a minister, I was called on a number of times to take Sunday services, and I found myself very much helped in working through my own grief and perplexities by having to preach on the Bible passages set for the week. One of these, soon after the death, was the story of David and Absalom. You probably know it well. King David had a number of wives, and a number of children. Most of these children grew up as spoiled brats, and the record of II Samuel indicates that their father had never denied them anything in their lives. One of them, Absalom, in particular, saw his father growing old, thought he could do a better job as King, and so organized a revolution. King David was forced to flee from Jerusalem, by a route to be followed later by Jesus himself - across the brook Kidron, up the Mount of Olives, and then into the wilderness across the Jordan.

David's army rallied to him to fight Absalom, and he gave them strict instructions to spare Absalom's life. Absalom lost the battle, and as he rode away through the forest, his long hair got caught in a tree, his mule moved on, and he was left, a sitting target, hanging between heaven and earth. Some of the soldiers there remembered their orders, and left him. However David's general, Joab, took a spear, ran him through, and killed him. When David heard the news, he was heartbroken. No matter that he had won the battle. All he could think of was the son he had lost - "Would I had died for thee, Absalom my son!"

David's conduct here is a picture of the love of God for every lost sinner who has ever rebelled against him. If I were God, I am sure that I wouldn't have that capacity to love those who sin and those who rebel. But thank God that I'm not God. That love of God for man, shown in a picture for us by David for his rebellious son Absalom, is the grounds upon which we can come back to our Father, even when

we have sinned against him, and ask for his forgiveness and receive it. That same love cost the life of Jesus. That same love, if we are truly to be "*children of our Father in heaven*", makes it necessary for us "good guys" to pay the price of sin in this world, in our own undeserved losses and sufferings. It is the price we believers have to pay so that those who are now straying from the commands of God will be able one day to be reconciled to their Father.

Faith

How then has my Faith stood up to all this battering? I think a number of us secretly wonder at the way we might react, if at some time things really went wrong in our lives. Religion can be fine when the skies are sunny and the days are warm: what when the clouds darken and the storms come and the days grow cold? Can God still be trusted then?

The good news I can give you is that where God gives the problem, God also gives the strength. I started keeping a list around this time of all the strange coincidences and happenings that seemed to indicate to me that a hidden hand was at work. It came to about thirty items in just a few weeks. The enormous sense we had of Cathy's presence in the days following her death, guiding us in the funeral arrangements. The insurance policies that had been placed on her life, one by her Credit Union only the night before her death. The thunder and brief rainstorm that took place during the funeral service, and the great square cloud with a roll of thunder, but no rain, that came up during the interment of her ashes. The finding of a house for Tony and the children, bought with insurance money, in the area where we live, at a reasonable price, with the sale contract signed within twelve hours of commencing our search. My association with the Prison Fellowship, which had led to my first visit to the Edmonton Institution only a month before, and where I was due to speak just three days after the murder took place. The ministry of preaching I was given in the weeks following this loss. I could not get away from the feeling that God was writing the script for a story I could not yet fully understand, and my part was to follow him, without always knowing why, or how things would end.

There was also a very positive side to this disaster, and it was in the torrent of love and sympathy that swept over us from friends in all directions, but particularly from the church. Our living room was filled with flowers, and I recall Florence pointing out to one visiting clergyman that every single arrangement came from someone we knew who had also lost a loved one. There was food that arrived from all quarters, including two roast chickens with potatoes and vegetables that some people from Nancy's church brought around just when we felt we could never face cold meat and cheese again. There was the efficiency and tact of the funeral director, of the police, and the concern of so many of my fellow clergy. There was prayer - prayers from all directions and all parts of the country, that continue and uphold us even now. It is true that there was one deranged murderer at large in the city responsible for this death - but the other side of the story the press never got around to telling was the incredible kindness and concern of thousands of people, who remembered us with prayers, letters, flowers, food and helpful services, and we can never thank them enough. It was an experience of Christian love that I am never going to forget.

One thing I learned and I pass on to you was the value of one's regular spiritual life. A loss like this comes on you like a surprise test at school. You have to rely at such a time on the resources you have piled up in the routine of worship and daily study over the years, no matter how dry these seemed to be at the time. I think that the pastors here will know what I mean when I say that one of the most tragic situations a minister ever has to deal with is to have to console a family that has lost a loved one to sudden death, when they have no religious roots, no grounding in the familiar psalms, hymns and scriptures that can bring comfort to the bereaved. Cathy wasn't like that. She was a person who loved

her Lord and let the world know it - it was something of a family joke that she and Tony were always waiting to be 'raptured'. So the funeral preparations were not all sadness. They were rather a chance to speak and sing out her faith, as she surely would have liked us to do, and the service itself was a very uplifting experience - as a funeral service really ought to be.

These experiences have certainly also changed me. I was recently reading a book called "Roses in December", a lovely study of loss by a woman who herself has lost three children in her family at different stages in their lives. One question she had been asked was "Wouldn't you like it if all this hadn't happened, and you could have your children back?" Her answer goes very deep. She says: "Of course I would like to have my children back. However, I would not like to go back to being the person I was before I lost them." I find that our family has quietly joined a secret club that I never before knew existed: the society of those who have suffered loss: many of those losses even more tragic than our own. But I also find that those wounds provide us with the compassion and the power we need to help and heal others in their troubles. This has become a new and wonderful factor in my life.

One particular aspect of this is that I have started looking at sin and sinners in rather a different way. It's so easy to classify the world into "good guys" (who aren't in jail) and "bad guys" (who are). It's even easier of people to go on from there and think that because they aren't in jail, they must be good. That flies against Paul's text that *"all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."* Rather, I see sin now as a spiritual force attacking all of us, and gaining control of some, and our mission to those under its control is one to deliver, not to punish. One clear result of all this trouble has been a very strong call to involve myself in the prison ministry. There is a marvellous "captive audience" there, waiting to be freed. I hope that many in the Christian world will hear the call to this valuable ministry.

The final element relating to my faith comes in relation to two classes of people whose conduct very much disturbed me. What had happened had hurt them, and they wanted as little to do with us as possible. One class I had rather expected. It was those whose lives up to that point had been built on the rewards of this life - career, reputation, a good home, money in the bank. For them to know that all these things could be lost to them without advance warning in the time it takes to visit a public washroom downtown was a horrible and unpleasant challenge, and some people couldn't face it.

The second class of people surprised me more. These were people who often were active in Christian work, but it had been on the basis that they did great things for God, and God was going to do great things (in the material world) for them. For a clean-living Christian girl who loved her Saviour to be treated the way Cathy was appeared to them as a denial of the love of God and a denial of their faith.

There are two consecutive Psalms in the Bible, which many of you may know quite well. I understand that in the Hebrew, they go very closely together. One is Psalm 22, starting with the words Christ used on the Cross: *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* It continues with a terrible, graphic description of death by crucifixion - the parched mouth, the pierced feet, the bones out of joint. The next Psalm is the well known Psalm 23 - *"He restoreth my soul" - "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."* At first sight, you would hardly think these two Psalms are talking about the same God.

If you look closely, though, you will note a subtle difference. The first Psalm is talking about the body. The second about the soul. The body perishes, the soul endures. God, it appears, is prepared to be absolutely brutal to our bodies, to prepare our souls for everlasting life. We have to learn to lose everything in this world, so as to be prepared for the life to come. This is the lesson that Job in the Old Testament had to learn. To begin with, he did everything for God, and God did everything for him. Then the time came when God had to learn whether Job was faithful just for what he got from his religion - and Job had to learn that God's love continued for him even when he was so down that he had nothing to offer. It is a lesson for us religious folk as well.

I had a friend who came here from Ethiopia as a university student. The first September he was here, he was absolutely appalled as the trees in our river valley changed into brilliant fall colours of yellow, orange and red, and later fell off entirely. In his native country, where the seasons do not change between summer and winter, the only reason that leaves turn colour and fall off the trees is that they are suffering from some dreadful disease. In his eyes, the whole tree population of Edmonton's river valley was sick and dying.

Of course, we know he was wrong. The leaves fall from the tree in the fall, but we need not despair. The tree still lives. Spring will come next year, and the trees will be clothed in a new set of leaves.

Are we not like that Ethiopian when we think about death? Or do we know that our bodies, our possessions, are only the leaves of the tree? Winter will come and we will shed them. But the trunk of the tree is the soul, grounded in the root of God's spirit. The leaves will turn colour and fall - yet do we know that when winter is over, springtime and a new covering awaits us, more glorious than the one we have left behind? That is part of the Gospel message.

Some of you here may be in one of those two groups. You may not yet have learned to look beyond the things of this world, and realize that these do not last. Or perhaps you are one of those whose faith has been shattered by the harsh knocks we sometimes receive in this world. I wonder if I can help you with a little exercise in your imagination.

Imagine we are back at Hallowe'en - a time of year when we think of death, and I am told, it is when folk memory records the tenth day of the second month, when Noah went into the ark, before the rest of a sinful world was overtaken by sudden death. Imagine you are at home, on Hallowe'en night. Outside, it is cold, and the wind is blowing. Horrible creatures ghosts and evil spirits are outside your front door, asking treats from you with threats of tricks and mischief. You hardly dare open the door. (The name of that door, by the way, is Death.) Suddenly, however, you hear outside a friendly and familiar voice, asking to be let in. *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock", says Jesus, "if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and sup with him, and he with me."*

Cautiously, we open this door, and let our friend in. We apologize for the mess our house is in. We ask him to stay for supper. While we are getting things ready in the kitchen, we are surprised and pleased to see our dusty, messy house gradually become clean and tidy as he tidies and dusts a little bit here, and a little bit there. The house of our lives is transformed by his presence, becomes bright and shining inside, and we have a wonderful meal together.

If this is something you have never done, I invite you to do this now. Forget your fears, open the door, and say "Come into my life, Lord Jesus." He will come in, just as he has promised.

But that's not the end of the story. The dinner is over, and Jesus leans over and says to you: *"It's my turn now. Come over to my house. I go to prepare a place for you. Come to my wedding feast."*

It's easy to be frightened again - frightened by the idea of witches and goblins and ghosts and all the paraphernalia of fear that we think lies on the other side of that door of death. But the Bible says that Jesus came *"to set free all those who, through fear of death, spent all their lifetime in bondage."* (Hebrews 2.15) On the other side of that door is not fear and punishment, but the same Paradise that Jesus promised to the penitent thief on the Cross. The banquet is the King's feast, that so many mortals refuse to attend.

Those of you who claim to be Christians here - are you ready to follow Jesus through that door marked "Death" when he calls you? Are you willing, even filled with joy, to allow those whom you love to hear his call and travel there, knowing that to be with Christ is "far better"? Or are you so scared by the hobgoblins of Hallowe'en that you are still a prisoner?

Jesus has come to set us free from this prison. What is on the far side of the door is far more wonderful than the humble house here on earth in which we spend our lives. What I am asking all of you to say to Jesus, right now in your heart of hearts, both for yourselves and your loved ones, is this:

"Thank you, Jesus, for this invitation to your banquet. I accept. When your call comes to me that it is time to go, I will be ready to pass through that door of death, and will be honoured and happy to join you. When that call comes to those whom I love, I will be willing to let them go, looking forward to the time when I too will be able to join them again with you in heaven. Amen."

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