

The Christian Response to Death

I Cor. 15:1-26

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Do you remember the classic Disney film *Pollyanna* starring Hayley Mills? My sister looked a lot like Hayley Mills when she was young and because in the early days of cable television the Disney Channel repeatedly showed films from their collection, I grew up watching a lot of Hayley Mills movies. *Parent Trap* may have been the household favourite, but I also saw *Pollyanna* more times than I can remember.

The main character, Pollyanna, is a perennial optimist. No matter what happens to her, her disposition remains sunny and positive. Which leads to one of the funniest scenes in the film. She attends her grandmother's church for the first time. It is an austere and solemn congregation with everyone sitting stiffly and silently. Who knows, it might have been an old-fashioned Congregationalist church? When it is time for the sermon, the pastor emerges from a door to the side of the chancel and marches up a steep set of steps to one of those old-fashioned pulpits which towers over the congregation. The minister has a grave bearing supplemented by his dark black robes. He looks out over the congregation with a scowl and quite startlingly bellows, "Death comes unexpectedly."

One of the subplots of the movie is how young Pollyanna will charm the minister into embracing a more world-affirming, life-enjoying, happy religion.

But that line "Death comes unexpectedly" has always stuck with me. Not simply because I made a childhood vow never to become that sort of preacher, but because while being funny in the context, the words are startlingly true.

The ancients who wrote our Holy Scripture viewed death as a malevolent power. They faced it far more often and immediately than most of us do. So it is easy to understand why for them death was not simply the end of life, brought about most often by natural causes such as age or disease. Death was a force, often personified, which struck randomly and with abandon.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, that ancient Mesopotamian story that is in many ways the fountainhead of our literary tradition, deals profoundly with the issue of death and grief. It is the story of Gilgamesh, king of great-walled Uruk and his friend and companion Enkidu. Gilgamesh and Enkidu survive many dangerous adventures, only to have Enkidu die of some mysterious illness. Gilgamesh's grief overwhelms him. He flees his city and his responsibilities and sets out on a journey around the world seeking immortality, an answer to the problem of death.

Near the end of his journey, Gilgamesh finds Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim is the builder of the ark and the survivor of the great flood. His story pre-dates the account of Noah in Genesis, and many scholars think that the Noah story is simply the Israelite retelling of this even more ancient story.

When Utnapishtim sees Gilgamesh, he asks him why he looks so bad:

Why are your cheeks so hollow? Why is your face so ravaged, frost-chilled, and burnt by the desert sun? Why is there so much grief in your heart? Why are you worn out and ready to collapse, like someone who has been on a long, hard journey?

Then Gilgamesh answers in one of the great laments in world literature:

Shouldn't my cheeks be hollow, shouldn't my face be ravaged, frost-chilled, and burnt by the desert sun? Shouldn't my heart be filled with grief? Shouldn't I be worn out and ready to collapse? My friend, my brother, whom I loved so dearly, who accompanied me through every danger—Enkidu, my brother, whom I loved so dearly . . . the fate of mankind has overwhelmed him. For six days I would not let him be buried, thinking, "If my grief is violent enough, perhaps he will come back to life again." For six days and seven nights I mourned him, until a maggot fell out of his nose. Then I was frightened, I was terrified by death, and I set out to roam the wilderness. I cannot bear what happened to my friend—I cannot bear what happened to Enkidu—so I roam the wilderness in my grief. How can my mind have any rest? My beloved friend has turned into clay—my beloved Enkidu has turned into clay. And won't I too lie down in the dirt like him, and never rise again?

Utnapishtim responds to Gilgamesh, basically scolding him for his grief and lack of gratitude and then warning him that he must change his life:

You have worn yourself out through ceaseless striving, you have filled your muscles with pain and anguish. And what have you achieved but to bring yourself one day nearer to the end of your days?

Yes: the gods took Enkidu's life. But man's life *is* short, at any moment it can be snapped, like a reed in a canebrake. The handsome young man, the lovely young woman—in their prime, death comes and drags them away. . . . suddenly, savagely, death destroys us, all of us.

Utnapishtim sounds rather like the minister in *Pollyanna*—"Death comes unexpectedly."

We do not share the ignorance of our forbearers that led to their fear of death as a malevolent power. Death is no longer such a mystery to us. We have a better grasp of biology and understand death as part of the life cycle of a biological organism. For many of us in the developed West, life itself is no longer "nasty, brutish, and short." We are privileged to experience family members and friends living reasonably healthy lives into their nineties and beyond, ultimately dying of natural causes. Though even those deaths grieve us, they are not tragedies.

With our knowledge, we may no longer experience death as a malevolent force, but we are still familiar with it as a tragedy. A life cut short through accident. A poor person with limited access to health care. Lives shortened by war, violence, hunger, oppression, and

neglect. Airplane crashes, outbreaks of infectious disease, and mass shootings still startle and frighten us. The martyrdom of 147 Christians in Kenya this week.

In the Bible, sin and death often go hand-in-hand as powers which rob us of life. And though we may use different language than the ancients, we are still aware of how sin and death go hand-in-hand. So much death is avoidable. So much death results from our gluttonous consumption. Our failures to care for ourselves and for each other. Our unjust social practices. The human addiction to violence.

The Bible often speaks of death as a power to be defeated. In our day, we can think of these avoidable deaths resulting from our sinful social practices and the flaws in human nature. These sorts of preventable deaths must still be defeated.

Then there is the personal side to death, experienced by the bereaved and sometimes feared by the living. Death can be experienced as a loss of personal identity, meaning, and community. This loss is the source of Gilgamesh's painful lament. After his long journey, he discovered no answer, no solution. He returns home, fully aware that death awaits him and afraid that this impending death makes his life meaningless and absurd. Some of you may have experienced this sort of grief which leads to fear and anxiety about the end of your own life.

"I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord." Those are the words which open the Christian funeral service. And at the close of that service, when we commit a body to the ground, we pray this prayer:

In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our sister or brother, and we commit her to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless her and keep her, the Lord make his face to shine upon her and be gracious to her, the Lord lift up his countenance upon her and give her peace.

Yes, we Christians die, but death has no power over us. Resurrection is the Christian response to death, and in I Corinthians 15 St. Paul narrates the resurrection story. He opens with these words:

Now I remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which you also stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

There is something revealing in this phrase, "which you in turn received." As the Scottish theologian William Barclay says, we do not have to invent the gospel for ourselves. This good news is not something we have to discover. We don't have to be like Gilgamesh and travel around the world, striving hard, searching for good news. The good news is proclaimed to us, we receive it from someone else.

We receive it because we have experienced it in other people. We have observed how the gospel changed someone's life. How a beloved mentor lived differently than other people

because of faith. How an acquaintance from church faced their impending death with courage and hope. We believe the gospel to be true because we have witnessed its effects in the world. This is not belief in the abstract, in some intellectual sense. It is belief built out of our relationships with other people.

Therefore, we do not lose community when we die. Ruth Robinson, my kindergarten Sunday school teacher of whom I have often spoken, is long deceased. But because she played a significant role in the formation of my own faith, Ruth is here with us now. She continues to participate in the body of Christ, because of the faith I received from her. She continues to influence the world for good because of what she taught me that I now try to pass on to others.

And I know that the many children and teenagers I've taught (even though some of them are now in their thirties and have their own kids, which is what really makes me feel old) that those young people, who will outlive me, already live lives changed by their encounter with the gospel. Long after my own death, I will continue to participate in their faith and witness.

We do not leave the body of Christ at our deaths, but continue to participate in the on-going life of the church. We share in ecstatic fellowship with our fellow Christians, including all who came before us and all who will come after us. The circle is unbroken, to answer the question posed by the Carter Family's classic song. And the circle continues to grow, reaching out farther and farther, spreading our life and our influence. By participating in the life of Jesus, we are in communion with God and therefore with all of creation in an interrelated whole. When this perishable body ceases to function anymore, this life will go on.

This truth of the resurrection, this good news, is something in which we *stand*. The good news we have received fills us with the hope . . . and the courage . . . to live as Jesus lived.

Jesus lived a certain kind of life, which was very different from the way most people live. Jesus lived in solidarity with the poor and the outcast, and he challenged the powers which enslave people: Things like purity codes used to exclude those who are different. Religious practices that separated people from God rather than drawing them closer. Economic practices which robbed people of land and the ability to provide for themselves. Imperial policies which used violence to oppress.

When the imperial forces crucified Jesus it was a challenge to the way Jesus had lived. It would have been easy to interpret that the life Jesus lived was a waste and, therefore, no model for how anyone else should live. But that is not how Paul and the other apostles interpreted the crucifixion of Jesus. Instead, they saw the crucifixion itself as the moment which revealed God's victory. Why was this? Because they experienced Jesus as resurrected from the dead. If God raised Jesus from the dead, then the life Jesus lived was vindicated. It received God's seal of approval. In other words, God was saying, "this is the sort of life I desire all humanity to live."

Because of our own experiences of resurrection, we know that if we stand firmly in the good news and live lives of justice, love, and peace, that we will not have lived in vain. That our lives are part of God's on-going victory over the powers of sin and death.

That means the more we live lives of justice, love, and peace, the more those needless forms of death come to an end. By our lives and our witness, we continue to minimize the effects of poverty, inequality, war, and the other sins which lead to needless death.

Death, the malevolent power, is defeated because we have learned to live life the way Jesus did.

It is this good news through which we are also being saved, Paul writes. Gilgamesh feared that his life lacked meaning, that the reality of death made life an absurdity. He felt the need to strive in order to create his identity and meaning.

But we Christians do not need to do this, for our identity and meaning are not of our own creation. They come to us through the grace of God when we are baptized into the name of Jesus. Our identity and the meaning of our lives come from God, not from ourselves.

Therefore, we need not fear our own death or the death of our loved ones. Our lives are not absurd. Our identity and meaning are not lost, because they are forever part of God.

I do not know what awaits us when we die. But I do know that my life has meaning. That it will continue even after this body ceases to function. Why?

Because I have lived as Jesus lived. And we know from the story of the resurrection that such a life is not lived in vain.