

## Death and the Christian

By Jane Tooher, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. A version of this article was first published in the September 2018 edition of 'Southern Cross: The News Magazine for Sydney Anglicans', 25-27.

Christians believe that this life is all about getting ready for the next. So it's no surprise that death is significant for us, and that death is something Christians have regularly written about. There is great benefit to be gained from the writings of Christians about death, no matter where or when they have lived, because we are united by not only the universal human experience of death, but the glorious truth that it has been defeated by Jesus in his death and resurrection. Their contributions to the church can help us reflect on our own thinking about death and the Christian hope, serving to challenge, encourage, and refresh us. They serve to give us a timely word whether we're experiencing a season of grief or not. The following are some of the writings on death that I've found helpful in recent months.

### 1. The poem *De Vita Hominis*

The poem *De Vita Hominis* (*The Life of a Man*) was written to remind readers of their death. And a key theme of the original pre-Reformation version of the poem is uncertainty — uncertainty about the moment of death, but also uncertainty as to whether you would be saved.

Danish pastor Anders Sørensen Vedel (1542-1616), who had studied in Wittenberg from 1565-66 and was influenced by Reformers such as Philipp Melancthon, edited *De Vita Hominis* in 1571 and invited his readers to compare his version with the original. In contrast to the 1514 version, certainty is a key theme in Vedel's. Of course you still don't know when you're going to die, but you can be certain of salvation in, through and after death if you have trusted in Jesus alone. This real hope stands in stark contrast to the experience of those who haven't trusted in Jesus. Only terror awaits them.

### 2. Katherine Zell's eulogy for her husband Matthew Zell

Matthew Zell (1477-1548) and Katherine Zell (1497/8-1562) were German Reformers who lived and worked in Strasbourg. Katherine gave a eulogy at Matthew's funeral that included a detailed description of her husband's final two days. Why did she include such details?

Christians at the time were intensely interested in how the Reformers died. Would they die a "good death" or die in the turmoil of doubt and fear? Would they abandon their new faith at the end and revert to the superstitious practice of the Roman Church? Would the devil come and claim them? Or would they die confident and faithful to the message they had taught? Woodcuts were produced depicting high profile reformers on their deathbeds, and these were printed and distributed to encourage the Protestant cause. A striking note in these is that men like Martin Luther and Matthew Zell are depicted as calm and at peace. Importantly, there are no priests attending them, no one interceding on their behalf, no prayers to saints. The pictures promote the truth that we can have certainty in death because Jesus has secured for us a certain salvation through his death on the cross for our sins. Katherine in her eulogy made clear to Matthew's congregation that her husband had died without any intercession or last rites or prayers to saints. In their deaths they reflected the certainty they'd taught in life, a certainty anchored in the wonderful truth of justification by faith in Christ.

### 3. The Puritan Poet Anne Bradstreet

The Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) wrote numerous poems on a range of matters, including the deaths of those she loved. In the epitaph about her mother, Dorothy Dudley, Anne first describes her godly character. Towards the end she includes a line that makes clear that Dorothy lived, not in denial of the reality of death, rather the very opposite. Death focussed and shaped her behaviour each day, and this focus was right up to the moment of her death. In a classically Puritan way, her entire life was all about getting ready for the next:

Preparing still for death, till end of days:<sup>1</sup>

The tone of her mother's epitaph seems positive and straight-forward. In the poems for her three grandchildren who had died, her grief is more obvious and more complex, yet each of them reveals Anne's sure grasp of the Christian hope. This is seen in the poem for her granddaughter, also named Anne:

With troubled heart and trembling hand I write,  
[...].  
Farewel dear child, thou ne're shall come to me,  
But yet a while, and I shall go to thee;  
Mean time my throbbing heart's cheer'd up with this  
Thou with thy Saviour art in endless bliss.

### 4. William Macquarie Cowper & Margaret Cowper

William Macquarie Cowper (1810-1902) was the first Australian born clergyman, Dean of Sydney and Acting Principal of Moore College when it first opened on March 1, 1856. In 1854 his first wife Margaret Burroughs died from breast cancer aged 48 years old. Cowper wrote an account of her illness and death soon after she died, which includes some of Margaret's own reflections.

With regard to myself; whether my time on earth be long or short duration, I do desire most earnestly to devote it *all* to His service. (Dec. 1853)

But as to temporal matters, I have now done with them; I want to have my mind fixed only on the heavenly. (Sept. 1854)

I want some supporting and strengthening portions of Scripture, to dwell on. Death is a great change, a solemn event, and I don't know how my faith may be tried, or I may be *tempted at the last*. (Oct. 1854)

During the night I have been praying for all my friends, and all who have asked me to pray for them, and for all my godchildren. May they, and all who are dear to me, know Christ by happy experience, as their own Saviour. (Oct. 1854)

If it were not for the blood of Christ, who is God, how *could* I be pardoned! *Thou* Lord must save, and Thou *alone*! (Oct. 1854)

---

<sup>1</sup> All Anne Bradstreet quotes from: Bradstreet, A., *To My Husband and Other Poems* (Dover Publications: New York) 2000

Be Thou the God of my children, as Thou art mine! Through Christ my sins are all forgiven. (Her final prayer - which was for her own children. And then she expressed her own hope of salvation and peace, Oct. 1854)<sup>2</sup>

## 5. Sermon & eulogy for Mike Ovey

Mike Ovey (1958-2017) served as the principal of Oak Hill College in London before his sudden death on January 7, 2017. Peter Jensen preached at the thanksgiving service<sup>3</sup> for Mike on March 13, 2017, and exhorted the congregation to be thankful to God for the life of Mike:

When death breaks in, we have first of all a duty to the person who has passed away, to make sure that their mortal remains are properly taken care of. We have a duty to comfort the bereaved. To bring the comfort of the God of all comfort. But we also have a duty to give thanks. To give thanks for the life for the one who has passed. [...] we who know Christ [...] our task is to thank God.

A moving example of just this kind of thankfulness was provided by the eulogy given in that same service by Nick Tucker:

I am grateful to God for Mike Ovey. I am grateful to God for Mike's humour. For his constant concern for the well-being of others. I'm grateful to God for his and Heather's kindness, friendship, and example over many years. And of course I'm grateful for what Mike taught me. On the Sunday morning after I heard the news, I realised that the person who had prepared me for that day was Mike Ovey. He was the one who had taught me what it is to trust in God in the dark. To recognise that there is an ultimately powerful and wise and good God behind reality. And that he specialises in bringing apparent disasters and defeats somehow to a glorious end.

## Conclusion

As Christians we die in the Lord (Rev 14:13) and so we die a "good death" in that sense. Our sin has been paid for by the precious blood of Jesus, and so we have the certain hope of being resurrected to eternal life (Jn 11:25-26; Rom 8:38-39; 1 Thess 4:14). The circumstances surrounding our death and those we love may be absolutely horrific, as so many of us know all too well from our own experience. Yet those who die in the Lord, die ultimately in peace, and therefore die a good death. We will continue to grieve the deaths of loved ones, and at times that grief feels overwhelming, and it can come at unexpected times. A familiar smell, an association, or the absence of certain things can remind us that the person we love is no longer on this earth. Yet during those dark times, we can rest secure trusting in God's word to us, that one day the old order of things – that include pain and death - will pass away and that we will enjoy the presence of God (Rev 21:1-4).

---

<sup>2</sup> All Margaret Cowper quotes from Cowper, W.M., *A Brief Account of the Closing Period of the Life of Mrs W.M. Cowper, Who Departed To Her Eternal Rest, At the Parsonage, Stroud, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1854.*

<sup>3</sup> All quotes taken from 'Thanksgiving service for Mike Ovey, March 13, 2017, All Soul's Langham Place, London', <https://vimeo.com/208636800>