

Reflecting on death and hope

A FEW weeks ago I received a somewhat disconcerting email. Its first sentence put it bluntly. "Is it about time you thought about making some financial arrangements regarding your funeral?" It is a question that is guaranteed to get anyone's day off to a good start! That same day I also received a letter from a former seafarer asking me to take his funeral whenever he passed on. The instructions for the funeral service were very matter of fact and uncomplicated and the content of the letter certainly made the advertisement for funeral insurance seem more relevant. Preparation for our own dying is exceedingly sensible. But, like receiving your tax returns or having your memory jogged about an uncompleted household chore such as changing a light bulb, we can resent being reminded. From every aspect of the media to games

on the internet, images of death invade our daily lives, but it is other people who are dying, not me or you.

We might choose, like Woody Allen, to make light of it. "I am not afraid to die. I just do not want to be there when it happens." Many a time I have been asked to read out at funerals part of a sermon preached at the funeral of Edward VII by Canon Henry Scott Holland. "Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way you always did." These words are often seen as words of comfort, but they can also be seen as denying the reality of death.

Christians do believe in the reality of death. St Paul in his *Letter to the Corinthians*, and now JK Rowling in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*,

write that "the last enemy to be conquered is death". Christians live according to the promise that death, this enemy, is finally defeated by the events of the first Easter weekend when the death and resurrection of Jesus gives them the capacity to face their own death in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life. This was what Canon Holland was trying to get across in his well-known sermon to the vast congregation in St Paul's Cathedral: not that death is some sort of illusion but rather that death does not have the final triumph.

Seve Ballesteros, the famous Spanish golfer who, when he could not be present at the Open at St Andrews in Scotland or the Ryder Cup in Wales because he was recovering from a brain tumour, spoke these wonderful words: "For everything in life there is

always a beginning and there is always an end". They are very much like the words in the *Book of Ecclesiastes* in the Bible: "A time for living and a time for dying". But Seve Ballesteros also went on to say: "This is the tough part, the most difficult thing, when one sees that it's coming: the end".

Now that is quite a statement, and it can leave us either totally depressed or, more hopefully, we can learn from those words and positively reflect not only more openly on death but also be aware of the brevity of life, the preciousness of every moment and our need to savour its existence to the full, to work out what really matters and to live fully for what does really matter. Have a happy Easter and remember that the *Book of Ecclesiastes* that I mentioned above also speaks of "a time to laugh".