

## **KCF 5 : Victory over death.**

A few weeks ago, our on-line service at Inverkeithing included Luther's great hymn "A Mighty fortress" which I had not sung for years, and it set me thinking about how rarely we sing about Jesus' victory over the devil, except occasionally at Easter. We do sometimes sing "For this purpose" and maybe more often "In Christ alone" which clearly proclaims Jesus as the Overcomer of death. This month I have celebrated the loss of my mother 13 years ago: at her funeral I chose as one of the hymns, the little known "Our Lord Christ has risen" because I was determined that there should be a clear proclamation of Jesus' defeat of death.

Why raise this now? Something has changed in our world. Over the past year, everyone is talking about death again: every news bulletin records the latest number of Covid related deaths, and we can't escape from it. And of course for this past fortnight, much of the nation has been focussed on the death of the Duke of Edinburgh. This hasn't happened for the last 100 years—yes, we do get news about tragic accidents to aircraft, and destruction through storms, but on the whole death is a subject that we have avoided talking about, except at funerals. But the Bible has very clear teaching on this subject, and now may be the time we need to look at it again.

The Bible has some quaint phrases about people dying: the most common one, usually used to describe kings in the OT, is that they "slept with their fathers" (as in 1 Kings 11 v 21 & 23); it occurs at least 36 times in Kings and Chronicles, and is one of the clearest hints in the OT of life after death. But the phrase that I like most is that someone died "full of days". This is used of Abraham, Isaac, David, and Jehoiada (Gen.25v8; 35 v 28-9, 1 Chron.29v28 and 2 Chron.24v15 respectively). To me this gives the impression of having lived a complete life. Surely this is how God wants everyone to live? Our Lord Jesus could not die before His time, and Paul's desire was to "finish the race" (Acts 20v24). At the end of their lives, both could look back with the satisfaction of knowing that they had achieved what they came to do: Jesus in John 17 and Paul in 2Tim.4v7.

Maybe this needs to be our confidence in these days of such widespread fear of Covid? Who was it that said "I am immortal until my work is done"? Surely the greatest satisfaction in life comes from being able look back with that feeling of knowing that I have done everything that God has planned for me? For this reason, we need to see death as an enemy to be defeated. Paul actually describes it as an enemy in 1Cor.15v26, and as I have often pointed out to you that Jesus came to destroy all the works of the evil one (1John 3v8). Death is something to be resisted, both in ourselves and in others. [Although I was only a teenager at the time, the last thing I heard about my grandmother, when she was in hospital, was that "she was fighting for her life" – note it was NOT the Medics fighting for her! With our 21<sup>st</sup> century mindsets we may find it difficult to think in terms of spiritual warfare, but I cannot see one can escape from that concept in both OT and NT: there is a cosmic battle going on between the forces of God and the evil one. I think Michael has reminded you of this so clearly in his recent teaching on the Lord's Prayer?

It is the simple teaching of the scriptures that one of God's blessings is a "long life" as in Ps.91v16, and of particular relevance at this present time is the promise of protection from both plague and pestilence in the same psalm (see verses 3, 6 & 10). This is not to embrace the selfishness of all the promises in the so-called "prosperity gospel", but simply to take God at His word. We must face up to the fact that we do have an enemy, whose work is to "steal, kill and destroy" (John 10v10), and who seeks to devour (1Pet.5v8). We are called upon to resist him.

Yes, there will be a time when we have to face death, but that is after we have done all that God created us to do. Unless we are martyred, we should expect a long life. When we have reached the

age of 70, or even 80, why do we so readily turn to Ps. 90 v 10: “The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty if we have the strength”, and not claim Gen.6v3: “his days will be a hundred and twenty years” !

Here’s a final thought for today: Hebrews 2 v 14-15 says “... by His death, [Jesus] might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free all those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” If we tie in with that 2Tim.1v10 that Jesus “has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”, and Rev.1v18 “I am the living one; I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever!”: is it too far-fetched to suggest on the basis of these verses that until one becomes a Christian the devil has control of when we die, but when we become Christians we share in the victory of Jesus, and He is the One who calls us home. Until then, let us be faithful to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (Heb.12v1). That is also the reason why, when someone within the church is sick, we have the responsibility to battle on their behalf and if necessary defeat any spirit of death which may be trying to take them away.

If ever I again have the privilege of joining with you live for an Easter celebration, this is the hymn I want to teach you then:

*Our Lord Christ Hath Risen! The Tempter Is Foiled;  
His Legions Are Scattered, His Strong-Holds Are Spoiled.  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah, Oh, Sing Hallelujah,  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah! Be Joyful and Sing,  
Our Great Foe Is Baffled, Christ Jesus Is King!*

*O Sin, Thou Art Vanquished, Thy Long Reign Is O’er;  
Though Still Thou Dost Vex Us, We Dread Thee No More.  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah, Oh, Sing Hallelujah,  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah! Be Joyful and Sing  
Who Now Can Condemn Us? Christ Jesus Is King!*

*O Death, We Defy Thee! A Stronger Than Thou  
Hath Entered Thy Palace; We Fear Thee Not Now!  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah, Oh, Sing Hallelujah,  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah! Be Joyful and Sing,  
Death Cannot Affright Us, Christ Jesus Is King!*

*Our Lord Christ Hath Risen! Day Breaketh at Last;  
The Long Night of Weeping Is Now Well Nigh Past.*

*Oh, Sing Hallelujah, Oh, Sing Hallelujah,  
Oh, Sing Hallelujah! Be Joyful and Sing,  
Our Foes Are All Conquered, Christ Jesus Is King!*

Our Lord Christ Hath Risen! The Tempter Is Foiled; Hath Entered Thy Palace; We Fear Thee Not O  
Death, We Defy Thee! A Stronger Than Thou His Legions Are Scattered, His Strong-Holds Are Spoiled.