

**Sermon for St. Matthew's Pennington**  
**August 7, 2016**  
**Proper 14, Year C**  
**The Rev'd Joan Fleming**

Readings:

Genesis 15: 1-6  
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16  
Luke 12: 32-40

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

The year 2016 is the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare, and not surprisingly Shakespeare is the focus of many current cultural events, from *Shakeshafte*, a new play (his first), by former Archbishop Rowan Williams, now being staged at Swansea in Wales; to a choral recital I heard a few nights ago, entirely made up of musical settings of poems from Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. What struck me in listening to the concert was that the twin themes of **death** and mutability [inevitable change] seem even more pronounced in Shakespeare's verse than the theme of **love**. To a certain extent this may reflect the "spirit of the age": Elizabethan England was full of hazard and death an ever-present possibility. So enjoyment was to be seized in the brief present moment:

*What is love? 'Tis not hereafter.  
Present mirth hath present laughter.  
What's to come is still unsure.  
In delay there lies no plenty.  
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty.  
Youth's a stuff will not endure.*

The *Letter to the Hebrews* speaks of **faith** as the bridge between the now and the hereafter, between ignorance and conviction; and the very fact of our ignorance of ultimate reality makes faith essential to how we live in the here and now.

In Shakespeare's final play, *The Tempest*, as Prospero puts aside his magical powers and returns himself and those he has bewitched to the circumscribed conditions of "ordinary life", he muses on the mystery that we are to ourselves and the mystery of our own brief span of life on this earth.

*We are such stuff  
as dreams are made on; and our little life  
is rounded with a sleep.*

In our “natural state,” we emerge at birth from a great void, and at death we return to that same void. Our ignorance of the enveloping void is ultimately impenetrable; all of us must live by faith ... in something ... placing trust and confidence in the unknown, and unknowable.

We may choose to place our trust exclusively in ourselves, confident of our intelligence, our health, our exceptionalism. Or we may choose to identify ourselves completely with a spouse, a club or a profession, never deviating from the expectations of others. We may make such choices because they allow us to sidestep the unpalatable facts of our actual condition. But as Christians we must not and cannot flinch from recognizing them. Instead, we make a choice as to where, and in whom we put our trust. And we reinforce that choice by coming together week by week in worship, community and song.

The Sunday after 9/11 I made sure that my congregation would sing that stirring hymn, #665,

*All my hope in God is founded, he doth still my trust renew. ...  
God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own. ...  
Mortal pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray our trust;  
Though with care and toil we build them, tower and temple fall to dust.*

Yes, the all-creating and all pervading God does remain “unknown”, but Christians choose to see in the person of Jesus what the author of *Colossians* calls “the image of the invisible God,” and with the help of that template to try and model our lives after that same image.

There is a longstanding and continuing debate as to whether human nature is inherently self-serving or inherently empathetic. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes held rather a low view of human beings. According to him, we are all basically selfish, driven by fear of death and the hope of personal gain: all of us seek power over others, whether we realize this or not.

Do we share Hobbes' pessimistic conviction that without organized governance and legal sanctions, human life would be basically "nasty, brutish and short"? Or do we hold to a vision closer to that of Rousseau's, that human beings, when left to themselves, act with nobility and empathy, and that "humanity's natural impulse [is] to compassion"? Despite St. Augustine's insistence upon "original sin", experiments with toddlers as young as two have demonstrated a willingness, even eagerness, to share with others. [From personal observation though, of my youngest grandchildren, I hate to confess my fear that it may all be over by the time they are four. ]

And yet, and yet ... there was a silver lining to the tragedy of September 11, for that senseless evil prompted what Cynthia Bourgeault has called a "mighty outpouring of courage, compassion, and tenderness in the face of ... unfathomable horror." Many of those first responders were simply doing their job, though a job that in the circumstances took enormous courage; but many who rushed to help however they could were ordinary people, compelled by an innate sense of calling simply to be there for others. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

In an extreme circumstance, a Christ-like spirit grasped and guided thousands of ordinary people, many of them no doubt Christian, but most of them assuredly not. That multitude of anonymous folk clung to an assurance they could not name and a conviction they would never articulate; that what they were doing had vital meaning and purpose, and indeed was essential to who they were simply as human beings. Miraculously, in their willingness to throw their lives away they gained "treasure in heaven," and the "unknown" God became manifest in them, bridging the gap between ignorance and knowledge, between the now and the hereafter.

True, our ignorance of "what comes after" persists, yet here, even in the mosaic of mystery in which our lives take shape, occasionally the curtain is lifted just a little, and we gain an insight into the vital and ultimate necessity of things ... the necessity of reaching out to souls in need, of rescuing "those in peril on the deep", and respecting all who "seek a homeland," whether in Europe, or in that enveloping "sleep"—

the great unknown from which we emerged and to which we shall return—that lies beyond “that bourne from which no traveler returns.”

One thing we do know however: time moves in only one direction, carrying us with it, as it carried William Shakespeare four hundred years ago. And today, it is Shakespeare who must have the last word:

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end;  
Each changing place with that which goes before ...*

As followers of Jesus, we of all people must surely make every one of those measured minutes count.