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Christian Assurance in the Face of Death: Anglican Witnesses

ROBERT B. SLOCUM

Anglican writers from different centuries, continents, and cultures have shared in approaching the topic of death—in particular, their own death—with clarity, directness, and assurance. Such a topic is obviously not limited to Anglican interest or Anglican commentators, but a willingness to engage it is at the heart of much Anglican spiritual and theological writing. Although it is not my intent to identify a distinctively Anglican approach, I shall draw attention to the prominence of the theme in several Anglican writers, showing how they reflect on it with a faith and assurance that puts it in perspective.

These writers value life and do not minimize the seriousness of death. They are neither superficial nor glib, but they do identify in Christ a source of assurance that provides a foundation even in the face of death. They identify a connectedness with the Church in time and eternity, with humankind, and with the entire creation—and these connections strengthen their confidence and their sense of God's active presence. In certain cases they recognize death in forms other than individual mortality—such as death in the loss of a beloved way of life, or death in the experience of systematic injustice by the powerful.

This paper will briefly consider Christian assurance in the face of death in the writings of Julian of Norwich (who, though pre-Reformation, was a mystic and thinker very much in the English and Anglican tradition), John Donne, George Herbert, William Porcher DuBose, T. S. Eliot, and William Stringfellow.

Julian of Norwich

Julian of Norwich (ca.1342-ca.1423) was an anchoress who experienced revelations or “showings” during a time of serious illness. She gained a deep sense of assurance in Christ from her vision of the Passion. She recalls, “With this sight of his blessed Passion and with his divinity, of which I speak as I understand, I saw that this was strength enough for me, yes, and for all living creatures who

will be protected from all the devils of hell and from all their spiritual enemies.”¹ Jesus was directly available to her during this time of vision, giving her assurance and a sense of peace. Julian recalls that

our good Lord answered to all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly in this fashion: I will make all things well, I shall make all things well, I may make all things well and I can make all things well; and you will see that yourself, that all things will be well.”²

Julian’s illness brought her to the point of death, but she felt great assurance in the face of that threat. She explains that she was “very sorrowful and reluctant to die, not that there was anything on earth that it pleased me to live for, or anything of which I was afraid, for I trusted in God. But it was because I wanted to go on living to love God better and longer.”³

Julian is clear that this assurance would not prevent her from experiencing the hurts and losses of the human condition. God’s love would not be an “invisible shield” to ward off the pains of life. She recalls that in her vision:

And these words: You will not be overcome, were said very insistently and strongly, for certainty and strength against every tribulation which may come. He did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted, but he said: You will not be overcome.⁴

Julian adds that God wants us “always to be strong in our certainty, in well-being and in woe, for he loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him, and all will be well.”⁵ In fact, Julian’s illness was the occasion for her visions, and hence for her deep personal experience of assurance available in Christ.

Donne

Like Julian, John Donne (1572-1631) also wrote about Christian assurance in the face of death after experiencing a serious illness, the physical crisis of his infirmity being, like hers, the occasion for his reflections on mortality. His confidence was grounded in Jesus’ victory over death, whereby salvation is made available to the believer. He writes in his “Hymne to God My God, in My Sickness”:

¹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, S.J., trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 130.

² Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 151.

³ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 127.

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 165.

⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 165.

We thinke that *Paradise* and *Calvarie*,
Christs Crosse, and *Adams tree*, stood in one place;
 Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;
 As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,
 May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace.⁶

Donne's lived experience of illness is the point of encounter with his mortality. Although his reaction of fear and concern for his life is unstated, it is clearly implicit and present; it is answered and quieted by the sense of assurance in Christ that he discovers at this time. Donne discovers God's love, trustworthiness, and dependability in the midst of physical uncertainty and need. In the "Third Prayer" of his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, he says:

O most mightie and most merciful *God*, who though thou have taken me off my feet, hast not taken me off of my foundation, which is *thy selfe*, who though thou have removed me from that upright forme, in which I could stand, and see thy throne, the *Heavens*, yet has not removed from mee that light, by which I can lie and see thy self.⁷

Donne shapes his prayers in light of his mortal condition, his threatening illness, and his great trust in Christ. He uses a wordplay to modulate from his restricted physical situation in the sick bed to his keen desire that his illness be the occasion for putting to bed (laying to rest) his own sins, praying in his "Third Prayer":

make my bed againe, O *Lord* and enable me according to thy command, to *commune with mine owne heart upon my bed, and be still*. To provide a bed for all my former sinnes, whilst I lie upon this bed, and a grave for my sins, before I come to my grave; and when I have deposed them in the wounds of thy *Sonn*, to rest in that assurance, that my *Conscience* is discharged from further *anxietie*, and my soule from farther *danger*, and my *Memory* from further *calumny*.⁸

So sickness and the threat of death become the occasion for loving self-oblation to Jesus. Deep trust in Jesus' love, mercy, and dependability is at the heart of Donne's self-offering. He prays in his "Seventeenth Prayer":

And therefore, *into thy hands*, O my *God*, I commend my *spirit*; A *surrender*, which I know thou wilt accept, whether I *live* or *die*; for thy *servant David*

⁶ John Donne, *Selections From Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers*, John Booty, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 105.

⁷ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Anthony Raspa, ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 18.

⁸ Donne, *Devotions*, 18-9.

made it, when he put himselfe into thy protection for his life; and thy blessed *Sonne* made it, when hee delivered up his soule at his *death*; declare thou thy will upon mee, O *Lord*, for *life* or *death*, in thy time; receive my *surrender* of my selfe now, *Into thy hands*, O *Lord* I commend my spirit.⁹

Donne's assurance was also grounded in the realization of his membership and shared community in the Church, and his shared humanity with all humankind. This context of connectedness with God and with other people brought with it an ethic of concern for the needs and hurts of others. It meant, moreover, that he did not stand alone in the face of death. These points are poignantly developed in his famous "Seventeenth Meditation," in which his reflections are called to mind by the sound of a tolling parish bell that reminds him of his own mortality. Donne expresses his unity with the Church relative to the tolling bell by noting that he is a member of the Church and therefore a participant (even if an unknowing participant) in the Church's liturgical action of burying another person. Donne explains:

Perchance hee for whom this *Bell* tolls, may bee so ill, as that he knowes not it *tolls* for him; And perchance I may thinke my selfe so much better than I am, as that they who are about mee, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for mee, and I know not that. The *Church* is *Catholike*, *universall*, so are all her *Actions*; *All* that she does, belongs to *all*. When she *baptizes* a *child*, that action concernes mee; for that child is thereby connected to that *Head* which is my *Head* too, and engrafted into that *body*, whereof I am a *member*. And when she *buries* a *Man*, that action concernes me.¹⁰

The tolling bell reminds Donne of his oneness with humankind, in divine source, in mortal condition, and in God's unitive intention for us all. So he continues:

All *mankinde* is of one *Author*, and is one *volume*; when one *Man* dies, one *Chapter* is not *torne* out of the *booke*, but *translated* into a better *language*; and every *Chapter* must be so *translated*; *God* emploies severall *translators*; some peeces are translated by *Age*, some by *sickness*, some by *warre*, some by *justice*; but *Gods* hand is in every *translation*; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that *Librarie* where every *booke* shall lie open to one another.¹¹

Donne stood in unity with God and the rest of humanity in the face of death. He knew that death was not to be encountered alone. Neither his own death nor his

⁹ Donne, *Devotions*, 89-90.

¹⁰ Donne, *Devotions*, 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

neighbor's was an isolated or merely individual event since all share the same origin, the same mortal situation, and the same intended unity with the Lord. He gives expression to that conviction in his frequently quoted "Seventeenth Meditation."

No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends*, or of *thine owne* were; Any Mans death diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.¹²

Herbert

George Herbert (1593-1633) found assurance in the face of threatened loss and death by pointing beyond the limitations of our temporal and mortal situation. In *The Country Parson* he notes "how God's goodness strives with man's refractoriness," because when "Man would sit down at this world, God bids him sell it, and purchase a better."¹³ Herbert reminds us that the present reality is not the ultimate reality, and we should view the challenges, losses, and triumphs of life from the perspective of the larger, fuller purposes for us to be realized in Christ. We must indeed live in this world, but we must not "sit down" in it.

Herbert's perspective brings an assurance to the threatening situations of daily life. It is made complete by the confidence and peace that are inspired by trust in God. In "The Bag" Herbert describes such assurance in the midst of the storm:

Away despair; my gracious Lord doth hear.
 Though winds and waves assault my keel,
 He doth preserve it: he doth steer,
 Ev'n when the boat seems most to reel.
 Storms are the triumph of his art:
 Well may he close his eyes, but not his heart.¹⁴

Salvation in Christ changes everything. The threat of death is relativized, no longer bearing the ultimate meaning or the last word for the human situation. Death still means loss, but in Christ death is no longer the ultimate loss. In the poem "Time" Herbert expresses this change to mortality brought about by Christ:

Perhaps some such of old did pass,
 Who above all things lov'd this life;

¹² Donne, *Devotions*, 87.

¹³ George Herbert, *The Country Parson, The Temple*, John N. Wall, Jr., ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 98.

¹⁴ Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 276.

To whom thy scythe a hatchet was,
 Which now is but a pruning-knife.
 Christ's coming hath made man thy debtor,
 Since by thy cutting he grows better.¹⁵

From the perspective of Christ's victory, the passage of time and the looming threat of death has been changed from a "hatchet" to a "pruning-knife" that will actually be instrumental in bringing about humanity's perfection. Our confidence and assurance are grounded in the resurrection, enabling us to look forward expectantly to the ultimate coming of Christ in power and glory. The threat of death pales in light of this hope. Herbert describes this assurance and hope in the poem "Death":

But since our Savior's death did put some blood
 Into thy face;
 Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
 Much in request, much sought for, as a good.
 For we do now behold thee gay and glad,
 As at doomsday;
 When souls shall wear their new array,
 And all thy bones with beauty shall be clad.¹⁶

Christ is our hope. Darkness and death are cast out as Christ comes to us and enters our life. Herbert expresses this confidence in "The Call" in a wonderful stanza that is both invitation and confession:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
 Such a Way, as gives us breath:
 Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
 And such a Life, as killeth death.¹⁷

Herbert finds our Lord near at hand, and he finds assurance in that presence. With Jesus present, Herbert is not alone even in the face of death. "The 23rd Psalm":

Yea, in death's shady back abode
 Well may I walk, not fear:
 For thou art with me; and thy rod
 To guide, thy staff to bear.¹⁸

¹⁵ Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 244.

¹⁶ Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 313.

¹⁷ Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 281. This poem sees modern use in worship as hymn 487 of *The Hymnal 1982* of the Episcopal Church.

¹⁸ Herbert, *The Country Parson*, 298.

DuBose

William Porcher DuBose (1836-1918) is generally considered to be one of the finest and most original theologians of the Episcopal Church. Prior to his lengthy career at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, he served as a soldier and a chaplain in the army of the Confederate States of America. His experience of "death" during the Civil War was the death of his country. It first became apparent to him that the South would lose the war in 1864 when his brigade was routed from the field of battle for the first time. He realized that defeat was inevitable, and the world as he knew it seemed to be crashing down around him. He recalls this moment in his memoir *Turning Points in My Life*:

When we finally rested about midnight, I could not sleep; the end of the world was upon me as completely as upon the Romans when the barbarians had overrun them. Never once before had dawned upon me the possibility of final defeat for the Confederate cause. That night it came over me like a shock of death that the Confederacy was beginning to break: the strain even of unbroken victory had been too long and too heavy: it would be impossible much longer to resist the force of the ever-renewed and ever-increasing pressure of new armies and inexhaustible resources.¹⁹

In some ways, the shock that DuBose encountered was more difficult to bear than his own death. His known world was being destroyed before his eyes. After the war ended, he returned to his home "to find it a picture of the most utter desolation, having lain in the centre of Sherman's famous march."²⁰

In the midst of this destruction, however, DuBose discovered a renewed commitment to God. In the crisis of defeat he became aware of God's active presence in his life. His faith provided him with a foundation for assurance that was not contingent on circumstances, enabling him to face and survive the death of his world. He recalls that

the actual issue was all upon me that fateful night in which, under the stars, alone upon the planet, without home or country or any earthly interest or object before me, my very world at an end, I redevoted myself wholly and only to God, and to the work and life of His Kingdom, whatever and wherever that might be.²¹

In retrospect DuBose realized that his situation was not so desperate as it had seemed:

¹⁹ William Porcher DuBose, *Turning Points in My Life* (New York/London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 49.

²⁰ DuBose, *Turning Points*, 39.

²¹ DuBose, *Turning Points*, 49-50.

Of course all was not so lost as that night it seemed to me to be. . . . But such an experience can never be altogether lost, and I go back to it at times for such a sense of utter extinction of the world, and presence of only the Eternal and the Abiding, as is seldom vouchsafed to one.²²

This experience was formative for his theology. He came to urge that times of human trial, hurt, and loss—the “little deaths”—can be more than they might seem. Such times can be instrumental for salvation. DuBose explains in *The Reason of Life* that “human or earthly conditions, the most difficult and the most painful, are not things to be set aside for us in the matter of our salvation: we are to be saved, not from, but through and by them.”²³

Eliot

The primary themes of assurance in the face of death are visible in the prose and poetry of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). With Herbert, Eliot points beyond the limitations of mortality to an ultimate and divine reality. He warns in “Burnt Norton” of the *Four Quartets*, “that which is only living / Can only die.”²⁴ Eliot also shares Donne’s perception of the solidarity of humanity in the context of an eschatological hope. He states in “Little Gidding”:

We die with the dying:
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.²⁵

With Donne and DuBose, Eliot recognizes the instrumental role of death in the believer’s lifetime path toward God. He writes in “East Coker”:

Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our, and Adam’s curse,
And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.²⁶

²² DuBose, *Turning Points*, 50.

²³ William Porcher DuBose, *The Reason of Life* (New York/London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 114. For a more detailed discussion of this point in DuBose’s theology, see Robert B. Slocum, “Refiner’s Fire: The Soteriology of Sacrifice in the Work of William Porcher DuBose,” *SLJT* 34:3 (June 1991): 41-7.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1943), 19.

²⁵ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 58.

²⁶ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 29.

Eliot also expresses themes of assurance in the face of death in *Murder in the Cathedral*, his dramatic rendering of the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket. Thus, in the archbishop's Christmas sermon, he gives expression to an assurance and peace beyond the rewards and contingencies of this world:

Reflect now, how Our Lord Himself spoke of Peace. He said to His disciples, 'My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.' Did He mean peace as we think of it: the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the King, the householder counting over his peaceful gains, the swept hearth, his best wine for a friend at the table, his wife singing to the children? Those men His disciples knew no such things: they went forth to journey afar, to suffer by land and sea, to know torture, imprisonment, disappointment, to suffer death by martyrdom. What then did He mean? If you ask that, remember then that He said also, 'Not as the world gives, give I unto you.' So then, He gave to His disciples peace, but not as the world gives.²⁷

Eliot presents Thomas's murder as a triumph, not a tragedy. Thomas embraces the cross of his own death for the sake of his Lord and his Church, and thereby shares intimately in the victory of Jesus' cross. His martyrdom is at one with the Church's continuing victory of life over death. Thomas is a sharer of this victory by his sacrifice, and he has reason to be assured and confident in the face of death.

Thomas powerfully expresses this confidence as the knights come to kill him. The priests urge him to flee, but he responds:

Peace! be quiet! remember where you are, and what is
happening;
No life here is sought for but mine,
And I am not in danger: only near to death.²⁸

When the knights arrive, the archbishop is prepared. He is assured, even triumphant as he makes his sacrifice "now" in union with Jesus' sacrifice and victory of the cross. He exclaims to the priests:

Unbar the door! unbar the door!
We are not here to triumph by fighting, by stratagem, or by resistance,
Not to fight with beasts as men. We have fought the beast
And have conquered. We have only to conquer

²⁷T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; London: Faber and Faber, 1935), 48.

²⁸Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 70.

Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory.
 Now is the triumph of the Cross, now
 Open the door! I command it. OPEN THE DOOR!²⁹

The meaning of this victory through death is confirmed after the archbishop's martyrdom. The third priest concludes that "the Church is stronger for this action, / Triumphant in adversity. It is fortified / By persecution: supreme, so long as men will die for it."³⁰ Thomas's sacrifice and triumph are personal and in time, yet joined with Jesus' timeless sacrifice and victory of the cross, and shared by the sacrificing and triumphant Church through all ages. Eliot, through the story of Thomas Becket's sacrifice and victory, restates Tertullian's maxim: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Stringfellow

William Stringfellow (1928-1985) was an Episcopal layman, an attorney, an advocate for social justice, and a theologian. Like Julian of Norwich and John Donne, he experienced a serious illness that nearly brought him to an early death. This crisis of health brought him face to face with his own mortality. He saw the power of death at work in his body and in his society, and henceforth he resisted that power wherever he encountered it.

Thus Stringfellow found the power of death at work in the militarism of America's involvement in war in Vietnam. When the Roman Catholic Daniel Berrigan was on trial for destroying draft records, an ailing Stringfellow appeared to address Berrigan's supporters and urge them (in a whisper) "to remember that death has no dominion over us."³¹ That statement had many levels of meaning. Of course, Stringfellow was resisting the power of death and sickness in his own body by speaking before that audience. The power of death was not going to stop him from appearing on that day. He was also urging his listeners, however, not to be cowed by the powers of death at work in their world. They were not to be overcome by death at work in a society driven by militarism and by abuse of the weak and the poor.

Stringfellow recognized the "social forms of death" in American subcultures, "noticeably those of elderly citizens, of ghettoized blacks, of prison inmates, and of servicemen and Vietnam veterans," in which "the banishment or abandonment of human beings to loneliness, isolation, ostracism, impoverishment, unemployability, separation" was "so dehumanizing that the victims suffer few illusions about their

²⁹ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 75-6.

³⁰ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 84.

³¹ Anthony Towne, "On Sheltering Criminal Priests," in William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 18.

consignment to death or to these moral equivalents of death by American society."³² Here, too, he believed that death must have no dominion.

Stringfellow's sense of hope in the face of death was rooted in the victory of Jesus' resurrection as shared through the corporate life of the Church. In this regard Stringfellow was at one with Eliot and Donne. For Stringfellow, membership in the Church of Christ's resurrection brings with it an ethical obligation for each member to resist and overcome death. Stringfellow explains in *Free in Obedience* that the Christian "is enabled and authorized by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and to himself in baptism to expose all that death has done and can do, rejoicing in the freedom of God which liberates all men, all principalities, all things from bondage to death."³³

In Christ we are freed from bondage to death, and our vocation is to fulfill that freedom in the way we live our lives. Stringfellow notes in *Instead of Death* that

the vocation of the baptized person is a simple thing: it is to live from day to day, whatever the day brings, in this extraordinary unity, in this reconciliation with all men and all things, in this knowledge that death has no more power, in this truth of the resurrection.³⁴

Conclusion: The Christian Assurance

Death shall not have dominion over us. We share that assurance with our victorious Lord, who overcame death and the grave, and who makes us sharers of his victory in the Church by baptism. As members of the community of faith, and as members of humanity who share a common origin, situation, and destiny, we do not stand alone in the face of death. We share assurance with many, like Julian of Norwich, John Donne, and William Stringfellow, who have faced the near prospect of death in their own lives, and have lived on to reflect upon the meaning of that experience. We share assurance with many who find ultimate reality to be revealed in—but not limited to—the contingencies of daily life. We share assurance in the face of death in all its forms—whether the death of our known world such as DuBose experienced, or the threat of death embodied in social injustice such as Stringfellow resisted all of his life. We have assurance because "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

³² William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1973), 69.

³³ William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (New York: Seabury, 1964), 128.

³⁴ William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death: New and Expanded Edition* (New York: Seabury, 1976, originally published 1963), 112.