

THE FINAL MYSTERY

Witness at the Funeral of Joseph Wesley Mathews

October 20, 1977

Grace is yours and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are gathered here to celebrate the life and death of Joseph Wesley Mathews. His unique and unrepeatable involvement in the human adventure has been marked by an unusual degree of awakenment, engagement and fulfillment. Having lived his life and lived his death, for him that adventure is now complete. By the community of faith, his death, and the death of every person, is received in gratitude and humility.

What I declare here today is not spoken as Joe's brother, though each of us long ago understood that we might have to "speak words" over the other as God should purpose. We who are his family have known with increasing certainty that his caring for us was finally under the rubric of that caring for all to which he was so relentlessly committed. Because that universal love was with him so strong, we who are bound to Joe with ties of marriage and blood have experienced love in very full measure. For this we are grateful.

Rather, I speak for the community of faith, for the historic church of which he is always profoundly a part. The church has ever found ways to embrace and celebrate the life and death of its members. This is articulated in a great variety of ways but nowhere more specifically than in words St. Paul addressed to the earliest church in Rome when he said: "No one of us lives to himself and no one of us dies to himself. If we live, we live unto the Lord; and if we die, we die unto the Lord; so that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." (Romans 14:7-9) Let us hear these words as the very word of God.

I

Here is realism in pronounced degree. There is no attempt at avoidance of death - as if that were open to us! Death is a part of life and may not be explained away. All of us, without any exception, must die. Death is therefore affirmed as good - as a gift from God. Though it involves grief and sorrow and experience of loss, Christianly, it is not seen as tragedy but as triumph; not as defeat but as victory.

Death intrudes into live and life intrudes into death. This insistence upon the linking of life and death bears in upon us throughout scripture with startling consistency. Whether the witness be psalmist or prophet or apostle or evangelist, all have testified to this truth and that within our hearing during this very service.

Yet this truth is not operative in any automatic or autonomous sense. As we do not live unto ourselves, so we do not die unto ourselves. We are not in isolation, but in relationship, not merely with one another but with the One who placed us here and before Whom we are finally accountable. But we do not belong to one another; we belong to the Lord in life and death. The whole story of the people of God shouts this out to all who will hear it. As if to make this unmistakably clear, it is in our text stated four different times in four different ways that in living and dying we are the Lord's. This is the way things are. There is no other way to make sense of human existence. This is eternal life. This is the reality of the resurrection symbol and story. He, the Lord, is the final mysterious one. The Church is concerned from first to last with God: this final mystery; this wholly other; this "not-me-ness"; this one we are up against when we are "up against it", which Jesus, the appointed one, called "Father".

There is the Gospels' startling directness and immediacy about this relationship of Father and Son. Moreover, Jesus the Christ, authorizes and empowers us to call him Father too - this One who is that terrifying reality we discern at the very heart of life. This mysterious one invites and warrants our utter confidence. In him we live and move and die and have our being. In John 20 Mary Magdelene is confronted by one whom she thought was a gardener but finally recognized as the Lord. She tried to cling to him, to hold him in the past. It is as if he told her: "Don't try to interrupt this dynamic process. I must go to my Father and your Father and to my God and your God." The Lord of all is Lord of the Church, Lord of history, Lord of our lives, and Lord of our deaths. Our life and our death are in His being and so, as Joe himself once stated so compellingly, we are participants in his endlessness.

II

During his last days Joe observed that he was prepared for death and had been for a long time. What he was not adequately prepared for, he said, was what lies "this side of death". These were pain, suffering and loneliness. "In that order. And they are not the same, he insisted.

Few people have reflected more often or more penetratingly on death than Joe did. Here is a brief mosaic of his brooding: "Death comes to you as just sheer mystery. Death is all about mystery, and freedom, and love, and fulfillment. Death is a very lively part of a man's life and no life is finished without the experience of death. Death is a crucial part in the human experience which somehow transposes to every other aspect of life. Death is a happening to the Church, to the family, to society, and to the individual".

But for Joe, death was not just a coherent, theological reflection, much less an ideological one. It was existential. "Each of us has only one death to die," he repeatedly emphasized. The fact is that he died a long time ago so that for him life was a kind of resurrectional life. Among the papers of Samuel Miller, late president of Harvard Divinity School was the note: "I would die - if I had not already died." This is the fundamental point!

As for pain, Joe used to like to say that he simply could not stand it. But he did. Pain is physical, is solitary, is likely to be immediate and intermittent. It can be suppressed and even rather easily forgotten. Nevertheless pain, though sometimes a danger signal, is an intruder, an offence, an affront, a threat to one's well-being.

Suffering is deeper. It may have physical marks (heartbreak) but it is mainly spiritual and affects the whole person. It is not as sharply focussed as pain. It may be social as well as personal. There is such a thing as fellowship in suffering. Suffering cannot readily be suppressed nor easily forgotten. It addresses the deeps; it may even be unspeakable so that we must "suffer in silence". Suffering threatens not just our well-being but our very being itself. It poses the question: "Why me?" Its elements are both rational and irrational. Suffering therefore must be patiently endured.

So too must loneliness, especially loneliness in death to which it is a prelude. It is to be distinguished from lonesomeness or merely being alone. It is a solitariness that is imposed by life and circumstance and not an individualism self-chosen. It is experienced progressively as isolation, separation, desertion, being forgotten, overlooked, lost. It is finally the loneliness of the cross, of forsakenness, of **detachment**. Psalm 22 wrestles with this experience so that it is no wonder that Jesus quoted this Psalm from the cross, "The monads have no windows". From the outside we can only wonder what one goes through from the **inside** of loneliness. "We are all alone before the Final Reality. We have to learn for ourselves, as unrepeatable individuals, to walk in The Way; to live in the Other World in the presence of this world. That can only be done in total and absolute solitude. In anything else we can assist each other. But in the profound deeps of consciousness we walk alone." When we do we get a taste of effulgence and glory.

For pain, for suffering, for loneliness, Joe said that he was not fully prepared. But he was indeed prepared for these. It is the Church's business to prepare people for these strangers before they appear. The gospel is one guise, a preparation for the vicissitudes of life. Jesus endured pain, experienced suffering and so may we. "Jesus walked that lonesome valley" and so must we. A long time ago Joe was heard to say: "The greatest venture of all is the venture of death. The only sad thing is: you cannot share it." Soren Kierkegaard was right when he said that no one can go to school for you, no one can take a bath for you, no one can die for you.

III

What are we to say of this one man's journey into consciousness? The journey began in Breezewood, Pennsylvania. What an out-of-the-way place! It led to Ada, an insignificant town it might seem, and yet one must experience awareness in a particular locality. The trek led from Ada through the blood-soaked beaches of the Pacific in World War II and through the groves of academia to Austin, from Austin to Fifth City; from Fifth City to the Oikoumene, to the whole inhabited world. When one responds to destiny's summons, there is no turning back. What a long march it is for a follower of the Way!

In the course of his journey Joe was always actor, always dancer, always practical visionary, always explorer; and above all, always evangelist - a conveyor of the Good News. All along the way he was also a merry man of God - in Luther's sense of being merry even when there is nothing to be merry about. Have we not seen him bring dramatically alive a multitude of valleys of dry bones! Have not some of us seen him do an ecstatic Zorba's dance on the very brink of Victoria Falls on the roaring Zambesi and did not all of us experience the sheer awe-filling wonder of that moment! Have we not seen Joe plan a hundred campaigns with all the commitment and passion of a Chinese General! Have we not seen him set a base camp at about the point of Rudolph Otto's elucidation of The Idea of the Holy and then lead an expedition into the depths of human consciousness, inventing a new vocabulary for states of being meaningful to modern man! He helped to update the topographical map of the other world in the midst of this world. Have we not seen him clarify the Gospel for his contemporaries and enable others to enter into fuller human consciousness! Our forebearers would have called this conversion, for Joe was always a herald of Glad Tidings, a pilgrim and colleague along the cruciform way. All of his emphases were intended to lead to the realm of action and not to mere ideology.

This is not to say that one would always agree with Joe; but you could not ignore him. I confess that everytime I heard such words as "doed" and "be'd" I would cringe and feel that I was attending yet another grammarian's funeral. You either loved him or hated him. But he did perform the Christian's job of constantly turning matter into spirit!

All this he did in deep commitment to the church and in total expenditure of himself for his neighbor, near at hand and throughout the globe. The Gospel authorizes the nobodies of this world to become somebodies, and then it requires of those who know they have become somebodies intentionally to become nobodies. However hard and prolonged the struggle, Joe was prepared to be a nobody for the sake of the Gospel and all humanity.

IV

Finally, we come back to the Word, from which we have not in fact greatly strayed. The same apostle Paul who gave us our text in his letter to the Christians at Rome gives us this similar word from his letter to God's people in Corinth when he wrote: "Everything belongs to you - Paul, Apollos and Cephas, the world, life and death, the present and future, all of them belong to you - yet you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God." (I Cor. 3: 21-23) These words I read in a little service with the Order just before Joe's death. How much they speak to the condition of us all!

Apollos suggests the Eastern tradition, Cephas or Peter the Roman tradition and we Protestants like to think Paul is altogether ours. But the apostle says that we don't belong to any of them. They all belong to all of us. And we belong to Christ. And Christ belongs to God.

Or take the world, the whole wide world, the entire temporal order. We do not belong to it. It belongs to us. Yet, we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Or what of life and death? We do not belong to them. They belong to us; and we belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Or what of the present and the future? We do not belong to them. Rather, they belong to us. We belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God! So our ownership is once more placed in its appropriate perspective. The event of the death of one of our members brings these matters to sharpest focus.

Last Sunday in the presence of members of the Order: Ecumenical, I pronounced absolution for Joe in the name of the Triune God. Last summer, he acknowledged his sin in a public confessional in this very room. For then he said in his last plenary address: "I am extremely grateful to all of my colleagues over the last twenty-five years who have with a patience that in my solemn moments astounds me, put up with all my stupidities, my personal flaws, my personal mistakes, my wickednesses, my stumblings, my down-right sinfulness." This we know of a certainty: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Now, therefore, in this presence and on your behalf and on behalf of the whole Church, I declare the completed life of Joseph Wesley Mathews to be significant in history and entirely acceptable to God into whose merciful hands we now commend him. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.