

(Fr. Williams was canon in this diocese for 10 years and served as the bishop's confessor, from which labor he now rests. I preached this sermon at Christ Church, in Charlottesville, on May 27. The readings were Isaiah 6; I Cor 15; John 14; and John Donne's holy sonnet, "Death be not proud."

My wife Diana observed that if you had Bryan Williams for a friend, he made you feel like his *best friend*. That is a rare gift, an ability to see and respond to what is best in those for whom we care, to see each person exactly as they most wish to be seen, and it is for such a friend that we give thanks today. But there are no free lunches: the down side to that gift is that because Bryan had it, there are many here today who feel as though they've lost their best friend. One irony of life is that deep love produces deep loss, but surely the risk is worth it, and our sense of loss today is an act of thanksgiving in a bittersweet way.

Father Williams' last word to his friends and to his neighbors is this burial service, which he crafted very carefully to speak to us of his faith and of his hope. I am told that the service Bryan has planned for us may be a bit out of the ordinary for the Diocese of Virginia, but it *is* Bryan, and in it he is doing all he can to show us the intensity of his Christian hope.

There are, first of all, the words from the Bible and spiritual literature that he wanted us who grieve to hear today. The first lesson reminds us that the most important thing in Bryan's life was his vocation as a priest. He chose the Isaiah passage for today because it was read at his ordination to the priesthood. Isaiah was an aristocrat from the southern half of the Jewish kingdom who adored religion but also liked his comfortable life. While at worship he had an earth-shaking, temple-rattling vision that propelled him from an easy path through life onto a road that no one anticipated. To this day, Christians read much of his prophecy as outlining the pattern of God's action in Jesus. Isaiah's clear sense of call, stemming from his overwhelming experience of God, is what we look for whenever we consider a person for ordination.

There is more. Isaiah encounters the Holy One and instantly responds by acknowledging that holy is precisely what he himself is not.

God's response is *not* to put Isaiah on the couch until he realizes that his guilt and repression come from his past, but rather to say, yes, your guilt is appropriate—but I forgive your sins. There was something like a heat from a burning coal that seared Father Williams, for like every true priest he knew that nobody has a *right* to put on all these dry goods and stand before the altar. No, it is, as St. Paul says, "by God's grace that we have this ministry." There was never a day that Bryan did not thank God for the gift of meaning and purpose that had been given him midway through life's journey. Many around the church echo those thanks today.

Following Isaiah's lead, Father Williams was aware that in every human heart there is a constant tension between what is holy and what is profane, a tension between what we can be and what we settle for, a tension bearable only because of God's grace in Jesus Christ. From that awareness came his devotion to the English metaphysical poets, especially George Herbert, and only a few microns less to John Donne, who was given the last word in our readings this morning.

"Death be not *proud*...death, *thou* shalt die" epitomized Bryan's thinking about his living and his dying. On the first Thursday of April, just before Holy Week, he and I went casket shopping. Yes the rumor is true that he bought it early because he wanted the bonus points on his credit card—being religious does not rule out being smart. While we were shopping, he politely turned down the opportunity to acquire a super-sealed, eternally guaranteed burial setup that would infinitely delay the decay of his remains (give or take the work of a few anaerobic bacteria). He looked at the kindly and genuinely helpful man showing us our options and said, "You don't get it: I'm on the side of corruption."

This was not a political statement from a jaded New Yorker—it was a pithy summary of the reading from First Corinthians that Bryan wanted us to hear this morning: wonderful and good as God has made it, the life of this body must be relinquished if it is to be transformed. Thus the death rate remains one each. We have to let go of life to find our fulfillment. This was precisely what Jesus repeatedly said of his own life, and what Saint Paul says of ours in this beautiful passage. Bryan was quite willing to embrace the decay of his body because he believed firmly that God was not done with him, that an even greater adventure lay before him in the resurrection. "We shall all be changed" because God raised Jesus from the dead.

It was in this spirit that in his final conversation with his dear friend Jeanne, Bryan said, "I'm not afraid to die...but I am curious." He was secure enough in his relationship to God in Christ that he could indeed relax into the last step, even knowing that he did not know all about it.

Bryan has insisted that this last service for him be a eucharist, celebrating the Holy Communion as solemnly as the Episcopal Church knows how. With all the music and ritual of this liturgy, Bryan wants to impress upon each of us here today that it is precisely in moments of grief, challenge, or emotional agony that God most earnestly wishes to feed us. Bryan's soul was nourished by Christ at this very altar in the anguish of his struggle with cancer, and he wants us to have that opportunity for nourishment today. This elaborate liturgy engages our eyes, our ears, our sense of taste, and our sense of smell: our whole body is addressed with God's invitation to his table. When the choir sings Mozart's "Ave verum corpus," hail, true body, you will be hearing Bryan's favorite anthem. It was his favorite because the beauty of the music and the

devotion of the text together say one thing: no matter who we are or what is happening to us, we will always have a place at God's table. God spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies, even that last and great enemy, death.

I have purposely kept these remarks on the dry side, rather like Bryan's martinis, and that is because I have to get through them—for I am among those who has lost his best friend. But there is a personal twist to this story that has the irony his beloved 17th century poets reveled in. Because of a slight complication, Bryan's decaying body is wearing one of my shirts, and in that slight sense I am joining him in the grave this afternoon. That necessary loan set a pattern in motion: to help get myself through the beginning of last week all alone in his cottage, I wore one of his shirts, monogram and all. In the tactile experience of his shirt I felt myself wrapped up in him in some way that made me feel not quite so abandoned by his death. John Donne, who sometimes slept in a coffin for practice, would have liked it.

I confess to this unusual circumstance not out of a need to show my frailty to you, but to make a central point about Christianity and what we do here today. Our tactile sense is quite acute, and one way or another we need to feel embraced, even if only by clothing. In this sense Saint Paul's way of talking about baptism included the expression that we "put on Christ," and for centuries Christians donned white robes at their baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection. They wore them for a week to feel themselves wrapped up that experience of Christ. In the middle ages only babies were being baptized, and those white robes shrank to christening dresses such as we still use. In some places people saved those baptismal dresses until they died, and the garments were sewn into their shrouds—they were buried wrapped up in the baptismal embrace of Christ.

Baptism trumps burial. There is no moment when we are not wrapped in Christ's love and victory. It is for that reason that at burials we use the Apostle's creed, rather than the familiar Nicene Creed, because the Apostle's creed is the creed of baptism, the creed of death and resurrection. We commit Bryan to God's care wrapped in the same love and headed for the same mansions that the Apostles' Creed symbolizes. So I ask that we conclude this time of reflection by together turning to page 53 and celebrating our faith in that creed with strong and confident voices. Please stand.