

# MADE TO LAST?

## A Meditation

Delivered in the Duke University Chapel

by

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being Easter Day

Some weeks ago, a colleague and I went sick-visiting in a North Carolina hospital some miles from Durham. After chatting for a while, the patient whom we had gone to see asked us to visit one of his friends, the most interesting whom he had met in the hospital. The friend was all of that: a quadraplegic of five years duration, the result of a motor crash. He was just a head on a pillow--but what a head! Alive, alert, interested, interesting, with an Irish Catholic's wit and amused acceptance of Protestants. His ears were open to the outside world, the world which was scarcely aware of his existence. He asked me if I knew "I Belong to Glasgow," the theme song, the signature tune, of my native city. I assured him that I did, including the patter. He suggested that we sing it as a duet. I suggested that we do it quietly. He wanted it sung, fortissimo. We sang. Nurses began to arrive, then ambulatory patients, while a Presbyterian divine and a Roman Catholic head-on-a-pillow sang the praises of dear, dirty, wet Glasgow. I'm going back again soon to teach him the words of the second verse.

As we drove away from that hospital in the dregs of a messy snowstorm, my fellow visitor said to me: "We were not made to last." We drove in silence for quite a few miles.

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We were not made to last. It is another way of saying that we were born to die. Death is the only guaranteed fact which accompanies birth. Death is inexorable, inflexible, relentless. The Old Testament knows that. Listen to it:

The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength  
fourscore;  
Yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.



That is Psalm 90, verse 10.

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting;  
for this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart.

That is Ecclesiastes 7, verse 2.

A voice says, "Cry!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.

That is Isaiah 40, verses 6-7a.

That is the message of the first part of the morning Lesson (Job 14). There the emphasis is on the brevity of life (1-2), and the finality of death (7-10). Bacon, in one of his essays, put it very simply: "It is as natural to die as to be born; and to a little infant, perhaps, the one is as painful as the other." And there is an Arabian proverb: "Death is a black camel, which kneels at the gates of all."

As you are well aware, man reacts to the flat fact of death in all kinds of ways. There is the despair which leads to anxious frustration and despondency. There is the carpe diem attitude which suggests that today we eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow--or the day after, or the year after--we die. There is the disenchantment that leads to the anger which, perhaps, wrote this epitaph for an eight months old infant:

Since I have been so quickly done for,  
I wonder what I was begun for.

There is the resignation of the fatalist which accepts the inevitable, and says with his like-minded companions: "Morituri te salutamus": We who are about to die salute thee--Somebody. We were not made to last.

These were the kind of thoughts which began to run through my mind in the car as we carefully drove away from that hospital and our friend and his Irish buddy.

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As Easter approached, it came to me that Easter is the reply to, the rebuttal of, such a point of view. Isn't Easter the primary reason for the spread of Christianity? No Easter, no Christianity. And at the heart of its good news is something like this: We were made to last.



Do you remember Job's question, at the end of this morning's Old Testament Lesson: "If a man die, shall he live again?" (14:14). The Book of Job goes on for 28 more chapters, and never answers it. Centuries later, Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, replied to Job's question. The deduction that, in the Resurrection, death had been defeated is so central to Paul's gospel that he writes one chapter of 58 verses on the subject. Listen to just two of these verses:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain (14).

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile (17).

The two Greek adjectives which Paul uses to describe the uselessness of a Christian faith which is not centered on Easter are kenos: empty, purposeless, null and void; and mataios: useless--an illusion and a delusion. There is nothing to it. Christmas celebrates the birthday of our Lord Jesus. Whitsunday (Pentecost) celebrates the birthday of the Church. Easter celebrates the birthday of the faith, our religious point of view, our spiritual perspective. Therefore, hymns of triumph and hallelujahs and lilies and a vocal quartet and the Ciompi Quartet--and a short sermon.

Easter is symbolic of the confidence that in the divine economy death is not the last word. The resurrection of Jesus is an earnest, a token, a pledge that we, too, shall live on, through, and after our earthly death. Therefore, Paul ends the chapter with a shout:

O death, where is thy sting?

O grave, where is thy victory?

But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (55, 57).

Proof? There is none, in any scientific sense. Such an attitude to life and death is based on who we believe to be the character and will of God as declared by Jesus. That is the kind of faith which Tennyson arrived at in the prologue which he prefixed to In Memoriam just before it was published. He took sixteen years to write that poem, drawn out of him by the death of his college friend, Arthur Hallam. In the prologue, part of which is Hymn 146 in THE METHODIST HYMNAL, he wrote these words:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust;  
Thou madest man, he knows not why;  
He thinks he was not made to die;  
And thou hast made him: thou art just.



I share Tennyson's groping confidence that we were made to last.

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Why does the University sponsor this service during a period of recess? (We once closed the Chapel on Easter, and 1000 people turned up.) Why are you here? What are we trying to do at this service? We are celebrating the birthday of our faith, and the defeat of the fear and sting of death. John Donne, a dean of St. Paul's in the 17th century, has put it into poetry for us, and many of you know the words by heart:

Death, be not proud, though some have called Thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death; nor yet canst thou kill me ....  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally;  
And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

We were made to last. Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,  
Who didst bring from the dead our Lord Jesus;  
Aid us now worthily to celebrate his glorious resurrection,  
That we may leave this place to live a life of joyful trust and confident hope;  
Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

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