

Dear Friends,

### 'The Defeat of Death'

Some of the things in life of which we are afraid are not always as daunting as they may at first appear, and if we can summon up sufficient courage to confront them, their hold upon us can sometimes evaporate and disappear completely. Lewis Carroll's young heroine, Alice, illustrates this beautifully when she stands up to the fearsome Red Queen in the classic story of 'Alice in Wonderland':

"'Hold your tongue!' said the Queen, turning purple.

'I won't!' said Alice.

'Off with her head!' the Queen shouted at the top of her voice.

Nobody moved.

'Who cares for you?' said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.)

'You're only a pack of cards!'

Many of us would like, if we could, to dismiss Death in the same cavalier fashion as Alice dismisses the Queen, but it is not always so easy. Do you know '*All is Well*', a reading often used at funerals? If you do, you will recognise its opening sentence, "Death is nothing at all...". They are comforting words and there is some truth in the message they convey. But is Death really "nothing at all"? The passage comes from a sermon preached by the former Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, Henry Scott Holland, following the death of King Edward VII, and its original context has largely been lost. Originally it sought to convey how we would *like* death to be, rather than how it actually is.

Death is *not* 'nothing at all'. It can wreck and shatter people's lives, destroy their sense of meaning and purpose, and call into question everything we value. Fearing it is natural, and grieving in the face of it over the loss of a loved one both right and proper. Jesus himself shed tears when his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35).

Death is a real enemy, but it does not have the last word. Its powers are limited, because when it has done all it can do, God remains untouched and his love for us unwavering. At Easter we celebrate his amazingly creative power to bring something new out of nothing, raising Jesus from the dead. To quote the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams:

"The Easter story is not about how Jesus survived death or how the spirit of Jesus outlasted his mortal frame ...; it is about a person going down into darkness and the dissolving of all things and being called again out of that nothingness. Easter Day... is the first day of creation all over again."

Death's power may be daunting, but God's victory over it is real, and it is perfectly possible for his creative power, which was present and active in raising Jesus to new life, to transform our lives also (Eph.1:19b-20). For Christian discipleship is not just about following certain moral principles. It is about being changed bit by bit after the pattern of the Lord we serve. To quote St Paul:

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone; the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

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