

# FIERCER THAN DEATH, STRONGER THAN THE GRAVE

Sermon 876

September 6, 2014

Burial Office for Llwyd Emrys Williams

12th Week after Pentecost

961st Week as Priest

788th Week at St Dunstan's

53rd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the  
Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Llwyd Emrys Williams died on Monday and left the world a less interesting place, with a portion of its brightness and beauty vanished, and with questions and great sadness occupying the waking thoughts and memories of those who loved him.

He was only twenty-four years old, and for those of us who can remember being twenty-four, it seems a particular tragedy—for such an age is a time of passion and possibility, of experiment and discovery, of exalted joy and crushing despair. Some people suggest that youth

is wasted on the young, but Llwyd lived with energy and courage, with a deep curiosity, and an exuberant love for others.

The American poet Edward Hirsch has recently published an elegy for his son Gabriel, who died suddenly and tragically at the age of twenty-two.

Like a spear hurtling through darkness  
He was always in such a hurry  
To find a target to stop him

Like a young lion trying out its roar  
At the far edge of the den  
The roar inside him was even louder

When it comes down to it, we hardly know our selves—much less another person, even if that person is our own child. We find ourselves surprised by their behavior, and uncertain of their direction. The depth of their convictions can be bewildering, and the method and manner by which they choose to live seems arbitrary and dangerous. The first time these things happen is when the child turns two. It is terrible. But the fever and

the sickness return with a vengeance, when they are teenagers.

Like a bolt of lightning in the fog  
Like a bolt of lightning over the sea  
Like a bolt of lightning in our backyard

Like the time I opened the furnace  
In the factory at night  
And the flames came blasting out

I was unprepared for the intensity  
Of the heat escaping  
As if I'd unsheathed the sun

There was a time when young people were considered grown up at the age of sixteen. After all, they could drive a car, for heaven's sake! Then the age of responsibility seemed to shift toward eighteen, when they could be drafted, or enlist in the military. Even now, the conventional wisdom suggests that twenty-one is the age of an adult person. But the older I become in this twenty-first century, and the more I am involved in the lives of students and young adults, the more I believe that maturity seems to arrive later—maybe twenty-four,

or even thirty. This all makes me more forgiving as a university chaplain, and as a father and grandfather.

I want to see young people get a second chance, or even a third or fourth, or tenth, or 490th chance. You see, I remember vividly being nineteen, and in moments of sudden unintentional recall, I remember the mistakes I made, the poor choices I fell into, the unhealthy habits I developed.

But Llwyd did not get a second chance. His life ended just as it was really about to begin. He knew there was more to life, and he wanted it. He struggled to figure it out, but couldn't yet do so. He was searching for something and could not yet find it. He yearned for meaning, purpose, direction, a calling if you will, but life had not unfolded to that point. It is unfair, but we have known all along that life is hard and often unfair, and we are called to suffer, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

We who are left after the light goes out, after the darkness falls, after the friends go home, after our family members return to their part of the world, after everything is said and done—we know the unsettling truth of death and the terrible fragility of life. The English poet and priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote this sonnet on the subject of grief:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,  
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.  
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?  
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

Grief and despair are the old enemies. They return when and where they wish. They interrupt recovery. They unheal the time through which we have survived.

Hirsch wrote of his own grief in this way:

I did not know the work of mourning  
Is a labor in the dark  
We carry inside ourselves

And yet, I wish to offer Michael and Laura, Allen and Elizabeth, all of Llywd's friends and family, a sure

and certain hope. It is a hope found in the quiet comfort of home, holding a cat in your lap, petting two dogs at once, and in the simple pleasures of an evening meal, or a conversation among good friends.

It is a hope discovered in the community of the faithful, in people who love you and help to pull you through times of doubt and darkness.

It is a hope promised in the love and grace of One who lived life so perfectly and completely, so truthfully and genuinely, that his life serves us as hope itself. It is a hope found in the Way, and the Truth, and the Life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is not sentimental or superficial; no, this is a hope born of Christ's own suffering and death, and reborn in his rising from death. It is a sure and certain hope. Something to count on in the dark of the night.

And nothing can separate us from this hope, this love of God—not angels, or principalities, or powers, or life or death, or anything in heaven or on earth or under the earth. This is the love which is fiercer than death and

stronger than the grave. It is the love which lays claim to  
Llwyd and to us all, now and for ever. **AMEN.**

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