

Patrick Taylor, Famous Deaths, Personal Grief

Sandra Millar

I'm delighted to introduce our first speaker this afternoon who is the Reverend Patrick Taylor, who is probably the most local of our speakers, and that Patrick is the rector of Stratford-upon-Avon, which will inform the things he's going to share with us this afternoon. So welcome to Patrick.

Patrick Taylor

Sorry, I became unclipped. There we are. I'm clipped again. Thank you, Sandra. It's lovely to be here with you. I've been to lots of conferences where the speaker after lunch has made some terrible joke about having the graveyard slot, but it's suddenly stopped me that I literally do have a graveyard slot. So we're going to be talking about a grave. I'm vicar of Stratford upon Avon. I've been there now for just over five years. It's reputed to be the most visited parish church in the Church of England, because as you probably know, Shakespeare, William Shakespeare, is buried within the church. And having oversight of an enterprise, if you like, which welcomes, I guess, 250,000 visitors a year. That might sound a bit of a disappointment to you. I think somewhere in the literature it says a million. I don't know where that figure came from.

It's 250,000, but that's still a fairly sizable number of people who come every year. And so having oversight of this sort of big organisation that copes with that. I have to confess, I've uttered those words that many Anglican clergy tend to utter from time to time in various different contexts. They never told me about this at theological college. How do we do it?

What was interesting was that after I was interviewed for the post, somebody who was on the interview panel said to me afterwards, you know, one of the reasons you got appointed was because you didn't mention Shakespeare in your interview. Neither did anyone on the interview panel. Shakespeare didn't come up at all. And that's actually an important point, because the parish, we're looking for a parish priest. Holy Trinity is primarily a parish church for the people at Stratford upon Avon, and it does all your classic sort of civic town centre church stuff.

And that's the most important thing about the place. And they were looking for a parish priest and I was looking for a place to go to lead as their parish priest. And that's why I ended up there. Shakespeare wasn't part of the picture. But having been there a short while, I quickly realised that Shakespeare really did have a big effect on our life as a parish. So I want to share with you, I'm conscious actually that one of my curates from Trinity is here, Nicky. So there's two of us with the experience of Holy Trinity and what it's like to be ministering in a church with a famous dead person.

So I want to share three things with you that living, as I've said, with a famous dead person has taught me. Three things it's taught me about, I suppose, death and grief. I'll just say what the three things are, then I'll go back over them in more detail.

So the first is the significance of place. The second thing is the common ground of death. And the third thing I've learned about is the importance of legacy. So the significance of place, the common ground of death, and the importance of legacy.

The D-Day commemorations were mentioned by the bishop earlier, and I heard the historian Dan Snow yesterday comment on the commemorations and the fact that he'd been over to Normandy to actually be there. And he said this, "there's nothing like going to a place to understand what it's all about". And I've been really struck by the importance of a physical connection with somebody you know who has died. And it's important for those who haven't been to visit Holy Trinity, Stratford.

It's a nice day out. You'd be welcome anytime, to know that actually we don't just have a memorial stone for Shakespeare. We actually have his grave. His body is actually buried in the chancel underneath a stone. His remains are there, and it struck me that the issue that you raised, Sandra, about direct cremations and this issue of, you know, if people don't have that connection with you know, the place where the person is buried or with the body, then that can cause difficulties.

If you saw a couple of years ago, it was three years ago, there was a documentary on Channel Four where they talked about some wild theory that his skull had been stolen and stuff. If you saw that, speak to me afterwards and I'll put you right. He's all still there. Absolutely.

Now there's a bit of a competition in Stratford on Avon to claim a link with William Shakespeare. There is Shakespeare everything. Sometimes people talk about it being a kind of Shakespeare Disneyland. There's the Shakespeare Hotel and then the Shakespeare ice cream shop and the plaque on the wall that says Shakespeare's second cousin once removed might've lived here once. Shakespeare gin, and everyone tries to claim a connection with William Shakespeare. Others, the Shakespeare birthplace trust, which are guardians of the place where he was born and they have a fairly close connection. But at Holy Trinity we are the real thing in that we really do have a solid physical connection with William Shakespeare, the playwright, because he was baptized in the Church on April the 26th, 1564. We know that cause we still have the baptism register, and you can look him up. And he was also buried in the church. As I said, his grave is there, his body is there and again we have the register of his burial in the same book, a beautiful old book. And that was on April the 25th, 1616.

Notice his baptism and burial dates are very close. He would have been baptized just within a few days of being born, and local folklore is that the reason he died at the time of his birthday was because he probably went out and had a bit too much to drink. One of my predecessors, the vicar of Holy Trinity at the time, did write in his diary that the reason Shakespeare died was he celebrated his birthday a bit too enthusiastically. So warning for us all there.

So it's the grave that people come to see. And that physical connection, as I said, is something that I've certainly reflected on the importance of having a place to remember, to be able to focus your remembering on that place. And what I've seen is that for many people who visit the grave, it's quite a profound experience. The grave is in the chancel just in front of the high altar, just on the left hand side. And the chancel is a beautiful part of the church anyway with wonderful stained glass windows.

And it would be a beautiful place to walk into anyway and it would have an effect on anyone, but people as they approached the grave, you can just sense that this is really quite moving and profound for many of them, particularly those who are not just there on a school trip. And they'd been told, right, we're all going to see Shakespeare's grave, but who have a love of Shakespeare have made this something of a pilgrimage to come and see his burial place.

So I've really been taught how important that focus of a place and that physical connection is. But something interesting happened last year. We did a survey of the people who came to visit the church to just try and find out why they were coming, what their experience was like, to see if we could try and improve what we offered to visitors. Something that really surprised me was that actually, it wasn't everybody was coming to see the grave of Shakespeare. Actually, it was only not even two thirds who said the reason they'd come to the church was to see the grave. Almost a third of people said they had come to visit the church as a church, as a place of history and architecture. And in fact 8% of our visitors said they had come for spiritual reasons. So it was a real wake up call for us and a reminder to us that we shouldn't assume why people are there.

We should not assume that everybody has come just because they're on the Shakespeare tourist chart, and they've come to see a grave. And that trying to just think about what our attitude is to our business. Are they tourists? Are they visitors? Are they perhaps pilgrims? And we've begun to think a bit more about offering ourselves as a place more of pilgrimage than simply as a tourist destination.

Michael Sadgrove is an interesting person. He was the dean of Durham, Durham Cathedral, where they know a thing or two about having famous dead people buried in their building. And he wrote this. "A pilgrim is a journey with a purpose, with an inner dimension intended to deepen our understanding and strengthen our participation in the journey we make through this world as human beings." So we've been reflecting on how we can encourage people not just to visit a grave, but to reflect on their own journey through life, through their visit to the church.

And this all resonates with some research that was done a few years ago into cathedrals and visitors to cathedrals. I think it was called 'spiritual capital'. And what they found was that about a third of people who visited cathedrals said that they had only come for the history and architecture. So you could sort of describe them as being secular tourists. They had not come for spiritual reasons, but of that third of visitors, 84% of them agreed or agreed strongly with the idea that they got a sense of the sacred from that building. And just over half of them said that they experienced God through the calm and the quiet of the cathedral space. So we've realised we must be really careful not to write off those who visit us as merely being tourists.

Michael Sadgrove said to me that he noticed when he was in Durham that the volunteer guides who greeted people tended to have bit of an attitude of 'well I'm a pilgrim, you're a visitor, and they're just tourists'. And we must be careful not to make that assumption, because many people who come, they might have come to see Shakespeare's grave, but nevertheless it might be a profound spiritual experience for them coming to this place.

And it strikes me that that might have wider implications for all of us involved in funeral ministry. That somebody might come to a funeral, because while it's great Aunt Agatha's funeral, and I suppose I should go, and you know, support family and show my respects, but we shouldn't assume they're just there for that reason, or that even if they are, they can't still in the experience of coming into that place on that occasion, have some sort of profound sense of encountering God and God's presence.

So we've tried to make sure that we see the potential in everyone who walks through the door of our church for an encounter with God and not just to see them as a problem of more people to get through and hopefully they will make a generous donation and keep the money coming in to keep the roof on. So that's my first thing I've learned about the significance of place.

Second thing is the common ground of death. Shakespeare, I mean, I'm no Shakespeare scholar. As I said, that's not why I found myself where I am. I'm an engineer by trade and profession. But what I've realised is the reason Shakespeare is so enduringly popular, is that he just speaks to the human experience. Every human emotion and experience can be found in his plays, I'm sure. Whether it's love, death, joy, sadness, grief, violence, peace. It's all there, and people flock to see his place still, and are fascinated by him because of that sense of connecting with their humanity. And I absolutely love the inscription on Shakespeare's grave.

It's a very simple gravestone. It's odd in that it has no biographical details at all. It doesn't even say this is William Shakespeare's grave. It doesn't have any dates. It simply has a quote on it, and the quote begins with the words, 'Good friend.' Shakespeare, it's presumed, wrote these words that he wanted on his grave, and immediately he addresses you as the person observing his grave. Dear friend, good friend, it actually says, good friend.

He engages with us on that very personal level, and I think for me that says this must be authentic Shakespeare. It just sounds like him. And then it goes on. 'Good friend, for Jesus' sake'. I love the fact Jesus gets to mention at this point. By the way, there was no mention of God or Jesus in any of Shakespeare's plays. Now that's not because he was an atheist. It's because they were very strict rules and laws at the time - anti blasphemy laws, which said you cannot mention religious things in plays.

So he talks about the gods in a general sense, but it's very hard to describe Shakespeare's faith by just looking at his written works. But we do know that he was a man of Christian faith. 'Good friend, for Jesus' sake, forbear to dig the dust enclosed here'. He's saying, look, just let me be. Don't disturb me.

And sometimes these words on his grave are described as a curse, and that comes later. But first there's a blessing. It says, 'blessed be the man that spares these stones'. So if you leave this stone where it is, you'll be blessed. But then it finishes; 'and cursed be he that moves my bones'. Now, I don't know about you, but I get this feeling Shakespeare was a bit anxious about death.

You know, he was very concerned that his remains would not be disturbed. There's a theory to do with the fact that it was a charnel house just adjacent to where his gravestone is. There's a door in the side of the church which is now locked up, because the charnel house was demolished a few centuries ago, but at the time that Shakespeare was around, there was a charnel house. Now a charnel house is a place where when you're digging graves in your church yard, and it's getting a bit full and you disturb previous bones instead of doing what we might do today, which is just quickly, quietly shovel them back, you would put them in a charnel house and they would be sort of stored and preserved there. Either that or you'd light a fire, and you would burn the bones on your bone fire, which is interesting where the word 'bonfire' comes from.

Anyway, that's a rather sort of red herring, but apparently if you read Shakespeare's plays you can see that he really didn't like charnel houses. And it's thought that because he knew he'd be buried just a couple of paces from entrance to the charnel house, he said, nope, I'm going to make sure they leave me where I am. My point is this. This common ground of the experience of death that actually, you know, here is an expression of our common human fear of death, which surely we are all, if we are honest, have.

And that fear of death or just the reality of death of course crosses every single human barrier. Every human person goes through the same journey that Shakespeare went through, which is expressed in our church. He was born and he died. And for me that gives us a tremendous sense of this common ground stood before Shakespeare's grave.

It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, what your background is. There is a human connection, and we are all equal stood in that place. So our church has been described as a parish for the world. Our visitor leaflets that we give to people as we encourage them to make a donation, I think there are at least 30 of those in 30 different languages. Incredible the range of people that come through. So we've tried, and back to this theme of pilgrimage, to encourage people to see that what we're offering them is not just a visit to a grave of a famous playwright, but to offer them the story of Shakespeare's life from birth to death, which is the story of all humanity, and a story which is by definition inclusive of all people. Makes us all equal.

So that's the second thing that having this grave has taught me, that common ground of death and something which helps us to see how important it is to be open and inclusive to all people that come, because everyone is able to engage with this journey on some level or other.

And then the third thing was the importance of legacy. So Shakespeare's grave is in the floor in the chancel with that very simple quote on that I read through earlier, but there is a monument up on the wall and it has a bust of Shakespeare. It's a rather unflattering bust, picture of Shakespeare, bust of Shakespeare, but we're fairly confident that's what he looked like because it was put there. That monument was put there by his closest family, by his wife Anne Hathaway, by his son, and daughter, and son in law who paid for it to be put there.

So, you know, it's pretty likely that when the bust arrived, if it didn't look anything like him, they'd have sent it back and said, no, you need to do better. So we have a fairly good idea of what he looked like from this monument, and there's an inscription on the bottom, and it ends with these words. 'All that he hath writ leaves living art.'

And there's a very strong sense in Stratford that Shakespeare is very much still alive and with us, because of course whenever his plays are dramatised, whenever his poetry is read, then he is there present and alive. And it's incredible the growth of interest in Shakespeare there is across the world, particularly in China. In China, they are building a full size replica of Stratford upon Avon. I mean, it sounds ridiculous. And I laughed as well, and I thought you can't be serious. But this delegation arrived with the brochures.

They are literally recreating the centre shape of Stratford upon Avon, full size. And in the plans, it includes the church. I mean I'm very nervous about actually Chinese authorities building a place of Christian worship. Actually, there's some quite serious things to consider there. Would it be respected? Thankfully phase one is going to focus on the birthplace and the theatre, and they're not doing the church yet. But there is a huge amount of interest across the globe in Shakespeare, and he has this incredible legacy. He lives on.

But that thing about legacy I think is relevant to all of us. What's our legacy going to be? Probably not that of a very famous person who's known across the globe, but the question of legacy strikes me as

being a very helpful one to begin to try and engage people with talking about death. And it's certainly something I find quite helpful in finding appropriate things to say at funerals.

So recently I did the funeral of a woman who was just a devote....her family was her life, and she was the centre, a real matriarch, a devoted wife and mother, grandmother, great grandmother. And she had this very strong loving family that she had left, and I sensed that when I said, and I'm sure many of you have said words like this, when I said at the funeral, 'look, she may no longer be with us in person, but gosh, she's still here living on in the relationships she's left behind and the example of how you love and commit to one another as a family'.

And it strikes me that encouraging people to think, well, what's your legacy going to be? If we want to encourage people to talk about death before it happens, encouraging them to think, well, what's my legacy going to be? What is it that I'm going to leave behind?

Perhaps something physical. Often people want to leave something with their name on a little brass plaque, but actually often it's more importantly, what's the legacy of the relationships that you're going to leave behind of people's experience of you as a person? It strikes me that asking that question creates an accessible way to begin to talk about death and dying. And of course talking about what lives on after we die. It strikes me as being a very natural way to begin to then introduce the idea of resurrection and what is the afterlife? What exists of life of all life after we've left this earth?

So that's the three key things really that I think I've learned is the significance of place, of actually having the body there as a place that people can come to and can connect with. I'm trying not to assume why people have stepped foot in the church and to welcome them as people on a journey and to encourage them to see that as a journey of faith and a journey that's pilgrimage. That common ground of humanity, which Shakespeare so powerfully speaks into and the idea of legacy.

And I just want to finish with, I sort of have a bit of a personal discipline of trying never to quote Shakespeare in any of my sermons at Holy Trinity. There's enough Shakespeare boffs in Stratford. They don't need another one. And I'm going to finish with a quote, but it's still not Shakespeare, I'm pleased to say. But it is a quote from a poem that was placed by the editor in the front of the first folio of Shakespeare's works. You may know that the first folio of his works wasn't published until after his death. And it's clear that the monument in Holy Trinity had already been put up at this point.

And so the editor chose a poem which really expresses some of the themes that have come up today about what lies beyond death, especially hope and life. And the poem ends with these words. 'Shakespeare, thy works out live thy tomb. When time dissolves thy Stratford and monument, here we alive shall view thee still'.

Thank you.