

Death of an Empress

IN THE crypt of the Capuchin Church in the heart of Vienna lie the remains of 143 members of the Habsburg dynasty. This was one of the most powerful families in European history, who ruled Austria and much of Europe for 600 years. The last empress, Zita of Bourbon-Parma, was interred there on 1st April 1989.

It perhaps cannot be said that the Habsburgs were more God-fearing than any other rulers of this world; but there

was a ritual which took place at Habsburg funerals which shows an admirable recognition of a fundamental Bible principle.

A contemporary account of Zita's funeral describes the horse-drawn hearse weaving through thronged streets of spectators to its destination at the crypt.

The Master of Ceremonies knocked on the door. A lone voice within said "Who desires entrance?" "Zita, the Empress of Austria," intoned the Master of Ceremonies, and listed her many grand and impressive titles. The voice inside said, "I know her not."

The Master of Ceremonies knocked again. The voice inside said, "Who desires entrance?" "Zita, her Majesty, Empress and Queen." Again, the voice said "I know her not."

The Master of Ceremonies knocked again, and again the voice said, "Who desires entrance?" The Master of Ceremonies said "Zita, a mortal, sinful human." The voice replied, "So let her come in," and the door was opened.

The Bible principle is this: "*All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field*" (Isaiah 40:6). That is what we are and that is what our lives amount to in the final reckoning – whether we're an empress or a beggar.



The Church and the Coffin



What is Life Worth?

The Bible book of Ecclesiastes takes a long hard look at life – what it is, what it means, and how best to live it. Its appraisal of the value of a person’s life seems pretty bleak:

As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take nothing from his labour which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a severe evil—just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has laboured for the wind? (Ecclesiastes 5:15–16).

In fact, it goes further:

For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

Some people are greatly privileged, others are born into poverty. Some people are dynamic, driven and talented and achieve great things in life. Others are not. Some go down in the history books and monuments are erected to their memories; others might pass away in obscurity and be instantly forgotten.

What everybody has in common is that when they die, they leave it all behind and turn to dust.

Godliness with Contentment

There are people who recognise this fact and conclude that life is meaningless: therefore they might as well enjoy it as well as they can: *“Let us eat and drink, for*

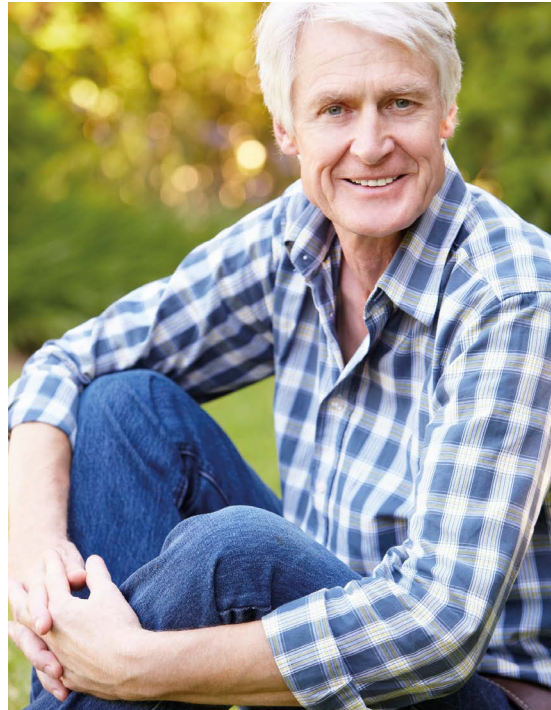
tomorrow we die!” (Isaiah 22:13). But that’s a recipe for a very empty life!

The Bible, on the other hand, shows us how this fundamental fact about life is actually the key to true fulfilment. These are words of the apostle Paul:

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content (1 Timothy 6:6–8).

Perhaps Paul is here recalling words of the Lord Jesus:

Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we



wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:31–33).

The state of mind that Jesus is describing is that which believes and trusts God, puts eternal life in God’s Kingdom above every other ambition, and seeks to develop a ‘righteous’ character – a character that is like God Himself. This is what Paul sums up as ‘godliness with contentment’, and it is great gain!

So here are two alternative responses to the human condition of mortality: ‘Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’, versus ‘godliness with contentment’. A restless and self-centred existence which will never find fulfilment and will end in oblivion, versus the true peace of mind which comes from knowing God, accepting what He gives us in this life, and looking forward with confidence to His Kingdom.

Death of an Apostle

You can look at the life of the apostle Paul, as it’s recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the many letters he wrote, which are preserved in the Bible. You will observe a life lived in godliness and contentment, despite great hardships.

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry,

both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11–13).

Paul’s second letter to Timothy is the last letter of his which we have – it was written while he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting execution. In the last chapter of this letter he looks back on his life:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:6–7).

Paul probably died as a criminal with no extravagant funeral. Like a ‘flower of the field’ he withered away and turned to dust. But few people can ever have faced their death with such calm and confidence. Using the image of the laurel wreath awarded to victorious olympic athletes, he wrote:

Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing (verse 8).

Chris Parkin

www.PSDgraphics.com

