Memento Mori at Home

Colleagues,
We're just back from "the ranch," the Schroeder family farm in Coal Valley, Illinois, where the clan gathered to bury my farmer brother Bob, third in the line of us seven sibs, the first to die. Age 74. Brain tumor. Diagnosed a couple months ago. Glioblastoma multiforme, from which none recover, we are told.

Besides being a highly competent farmer, Bob early on became the grave-digger at various cemeteries in this northwest corner of rural Illinois. Being a farmer-son of my farmer-father he kept records of everything—hog prices, corn prices, weather, Chicago Cub games—and, of course, the graves he dug. For 35 years—1962-97. Total 1740. Fifty per year for 35 yrs. All dug with a hand spade. No machines. In his prime, his kids told us, he could do one in 45 minutes—and then get back to cultivating corn or combining grain. He was a local superstar in many ways.

Bob's the only one of the 7 of us who didn't go to college. Just out of high school, he knew he wanted to be a farmer. He married at 19 and got started on his calling. One of my brothers maintains Bob was the smartest of us all. Though he never claimed that, it could be. None of us doubts that he was the richest of us kids. ['Course, with farm land prices nowadays in his neighborhood, you need only 200 acres to be a millionaire.] After Thursday visitation (some 800 signed the book), Friday church-overflowing funeral (St. Paul's Luth. ELCA in Orion, IL), Saturday clan lunch for story-telling, we concluded by all of us digging and then planting a "Bob" tree (sugar maple, big one, 15 ft tall) on the home-place along Schroeder Road between the two now quite tall evergreens planted for our Mom and Dad, who died in '74 and '87. There's space twixt those conifers for the rest of us.

So right now we have a close-to-home memento mori before us—but not without hope.

Even if it was a “good” funeral, it was not quite according to the specs Bob had outlined in one of his records. E.g., I know that he wanted “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me” as one of the funeral hymns. For reasons unknown to me it didn’t happen. When Marie and I last visited him two weeks before he died, he specified this hymn again for his final liturgy. “Dad picked this hymn for his own funeral, you may remember,” he said. That was 20 years ago. “So if even Dad needed that hymn, I do too.” We didn’t push to ask him what lay behind this wish. All seven of us sibs know some rascally items about each other. But maybe for him it was big stuff—wrestling with his own unfaith. Or doubt. Or despair. He didn’t elaborate. “If even Dad needed that hymn, I do too.” Too bad it didn’t make the cut for the actual funeral service. I think it was the public faith-confession he wanted all to hear as his last will and testament.

When he said that at our final visit, Marie and I popped open his hymnal (shelved along with his record books) in the farm kitchen and we sang it. Coupled as it is with the tune of “Go to Dark Gethsemane,” it sounds more morose than its text really is. With a more sprightly tune the Easter accents in the hymn text might surface more obviously, as they do in the “funeral” theology of St. Paul who coined the “chief of sinners” phrase for himself.

That was the last faith-statement we heard from Bob. Since it didn’t turn up as his own confession at the funeral, I’m going to give it publicity here.

Chief of sinners though I be,
Jesus shed his blood for me.

Died that I might live on high,
Lives that I might never die.
As the branch is to the vine,
I am His, and he is mine.
Oh, the height of Jesus' love!
Higher than the heavens above,
Deeper than the depths of sea,
Lasting as eternity.
Love that found me—wondrous thought—
Found me whan I sought him not.

Only Jesus can impart
Balm to heal the stricken heart,
Peace that flows from sin forgiven,
Joy that lifts the soul to heaven,
Faith and hope to walk with God
In the way that Enoch trod.

Chief of sinners though I be,
Christ is All-in-All to me;
All my wants to him are known,
All my sorrows are his own.
He sustains the hidden life
Safe with him from earthly strife.

O my Savior, help afford
By your Spirit and your Word!
When my wayward heart would stray,
Keep me in the narrow way;
Grace in time of need supply
While I live and when I die.

The conversation during the weekend, when it sought to be explicitly religious, was seldom as gospel-gutsy as New Testament "funeral" rhetoric. Plato with his immortality of the

soul got more footnotes than Saints Paul or John—or even Jesus. Happily the funeral sermon from the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran did stick to the Johannine text. But the public rhetoric was not Gospelly, not even Biblical. Instead of the closed eyes and cosmetically enhanced face of the corpse we all viewed in the casket, Bob was (really) open-eyed looking down on us from heaven, sending messages and waiting for us to join him. He was already there in heaven, not here before us in this box. Even without being raised on the last day he'd already conquered death. It was a done deal.

I've read again some of the NT sections on this topic (John 6, 11, 14; I Cor. 15; I Thessalonians) to get a second opinion, and then to reflect on how this NT vocabulary might replace Plato's for Christian talk at funerals.

Some observations:

The rhetoric is notably ALWAYS in the future tense.
John 6. Whoever "eats and drinks" Jesus WILL live forever [and] already HAS eternal life (namely, God's own life-that-lasts, i.e., life that is everlasting, so it WILL last forever).

John 11. Jesus IS resurrection and life. "Whoever believes in me, even though they die, WILL live."

John 14. "In my father's house are many dwelling places." Jesus "goes" (to the cross) to "prepare a place for you." But Christ-trusters don't automatically move there when they breathe their last. ""I WILL come again and WILL take you to myself, so that where I am you MAY be also."

I Corinthians 15. "All WILL be made alive in Christ." "We WILL also bear the image of the man of heaven." "The trumpet WILL sound, and the dead WILL be raised imperishable, and we WILL be changed."

I Thessalonians 4. “Through Jesus God WILL bring with him those who have died.” “For the Lord himself . . . WILL descend from heaven and the dead in Christ WILL rise first . . . and so we WILL be with the Lord forever.”

That’s why “hope” figures in in Christian “funeral talk” (I Cor. 15:19; I Thess. 1:3, 2:19, 4:13, 5:8). Hope is always a “future-tense” verb. Hope is faith focused on the future—things that are not yet, but are part of the package of Christ’s promise.

Every WILL reference is a Christ-connected assertion—and a link to Jesus’ own resurrection. “If Christ be not raised,” all such upbeat WILL talk is “vain”—in the literal meaning of the term—empty.

Could this NT way of funeral conversation actually become our own? Why not? Might it be something like this?

The only Bob we knew is in that box. He’s no longer breathing.

From his confession we often heard that he claimed Christ-connection. The water-and-the-word of his baptism initiated it.

What’s not patent “in the box” as we look at him—as it was when he was still breathing—is his Christ-connection. His death doesn’t undo that. ‘Fact is, it’s another step along Bob’s baptismal way.

That Christ-connection doesn’t transplant the “real” Bob into the heavenly mansions, but entails a promise that Bob has more biography coming. As Bob Bertram liked to say, Christ-connected dying is “death, comma” not “death, period.” There is more to come.

But we don’t expect it to come for Bob until the Architect of Resurrection Himself comes again and touches what’s in the box.

So we don’t imagine him “enjoying” heaven as we bury him. If New Testament Christ-confessors NEVER do that, what grounds do we have for doing so?

Instead we talk about Bob’s promising future, not his current celestial home address.

And to do so we'll have to talk about Bob together with the Resurrection Architect, baked together "in one cake" as Luther liked to say.
Sure, it's all hope, but Christian hope is not wishful thinking blowing in the wind. Back to Bob Bertram. He once confected a Crossings semester-long course, "Crossings from Ephesians: Hope Needs Success." And the "success" that grounds Christian hope is God's "Eastering Jesus," as BB liked to say. [There is a macabre link between Bob Bertram and my brother Bob. Glioblastoma multiforme was death's instrument for both of them.]
It's all linked to "if Christ be raised or not." If not, then it is "death, period." If yes, then there is more coming after the comma.
Word has gotten back to us that Jaroslav Pelikan on his deathbed not long ago told his son: "If Christ was raised, then nothing else matters. And if Christ was not raised, then nothing else matters."
Back to last week, up at the ranch—

We took along to the funeral the 7-foot long resurrection banner we have, an artifact from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, just before Seminex. A student seminary couple, Ann and Mike Brecke, created it in the early 1970s just as the storm clouds of the War of Missouri were gathering. Its combination of text and textiles is stunning. The Breckes created it for the Concordia Seminary chapel during the Easter season, and one day when it was my turn to give the homily, I used their banner as my preaching text. Possibly because of that, they showed up at my office door and gave it to me.

We frequently offer its witness for display, sometimes during a procession, when we attend funerals. So last week it stood in the chancel at St. Paul's Lutheran in Orion, Illinois. You can see it for yourself at this URL: http://crossings.typepad.com/photos/banner/ [Make sure you click

on each of the small photos to see the full banner. The words are clearer in the “with flash” photo.]

The Breckes chose one of the feistiest Christian funeral hymns there is for their text, “Jesus meine Zuversicht.” [Its usual English rendering, “Jesus Christ, my sure defense,” is not quite right. “Zuversicht” means “confidence.”] In Otto von Schwerin’s original, this hymn has ten (sic!) stanzas. The banner text is stanza nine, which sadly no longer appears in the last two ELCA hymnals, LBW and ELW. Back in the 70s the Breckes and all of us “Missourians” were using TLH, The Lutheran Hymnal, and there we had all ten verses.

The entire hymn matches the three rubrics I gleaned from the NT above: future tense, hope-filled, and grounded in Christ’s own resurrection. I suggest that you access the photo and then read the two verses copied here: verse one (ELW) and the banner verse, number nine (TLH). If you get a bit “cross”-eyed going back and forth, that’s not all bad.

Jesus lives, my sure defense
and my everlasting Savior!
Knowing this, my confidence
rests in hope and will not waver,
Though the night of death be fraught
still with many an anxious thought.
Laugh to scorn the gloomy grave
and at death no longer tremble;
He, the Lord, who came to save
will at last his own assemble.
We will rise our Lord to meet
treading death beneath our feet.

Plato farewell! You are too platitudinous. [Webster: banal, trite, stale] This Good News is really Good and genuinely New.

Since Christ IS risen from the dead, that’s all that matters. The banner proclaims it in more ways than I can.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder