

What would you have as your epitaph? I like the derivations of words, and epitaph is Greek – ‘taph’ means tomb and ‘epi’ means over. What should be written over your tomb? My family know to their cost that I can be completely lost in a graveyard or a church, simply wrapped up in looking at inscriptions. I find them hugely evocative, and sometimes challenging, moving or humorous. I particularly like the one in the Minster where a former Vicar continues to preach beyond the grave, exhorting his readers to be faithful to Christ.

What would you like people to read on yours? I spend quite a lot of Good Friday looking at the ones in the Minster. If you do a statistical analysis you’ll find that the vast majority are taken up with describing how wonderful the subjects were – and I’m sure they tell the truth! There was one in York which didn’t have enough space to tell of how wonderful a particular woman was, and encourages people to find out more by reading a particular newspaper which carried her obituary.

But there are two in the Minster which are of a different character. They look forward rather than back, and speak of the faith of the subjects rather than their achievements. One of them, in St Katherine’s Chapel, is of William Child, who dies in 1803. His was a hard life, in that he was ‘for many years oppressed with a greater share of pain and sorrow than falls to the common lot of humanity’ – but there is encouragement and challenge in what comes next. ‘He bore his afflictions with resignation, confiding in the merits and atonement of his redeemer for eternal salvation’. I love reading that when we say our prayers in St Katherine’s. A tough life, but with faith for the future, and assurance in the present.

There’s another, in the North Nave Aisle, to John Frith Soame, and his wife Mary. Tragically they died at 24 and 23, in 1830 and 1832. There would have been every excuse to be devastated at their early deaths. But the epitaph says this:

They are gone to the grave!  
But we will not deplore them whose God was their ransom,  
their guardian and their guide.  
He gave them, he took them,  
And he will restore them  
And death has no sting, for the Saviour has died.

I nearly danced on the spot when I read it. In the middle of grief and darkness is true Christian faith and hope. Death has lost its power. Jesus died, and wrapped up our deaths in his, so that when he was raised, we were raised too. There is joy out of grief, life out of death.

Let me take you to another ‘taph’ – another tomb. When the women came early in the morning to the garden tomb, close to Golgotha, what were they expecting to do? Perhaps in their minds they had an epitaph prepared, words they wanted to say as they carried out the most loving and intimate task of covering Jesus body with spices ready for the burial of his bones. What words had they prepared? What should have been written on Jesus’s tomb? But this is a cenotaph. When they get there the tomb is vacant, empty, ‘ceno’. And, beyond even what we know as a cenotaph, which though empty still proclaims the end of a life, or the lives of many, here there is not death but life. In the coming days all of them will

encounter not an absence, but a presence: Jesus in his resurrection body, alive never to die again.

That is the hope of this Easter day. And if you want an epitaph, look around you. Jesus's tomb is empty, and we are the epitaph. We are the continuing memory of Jesus's life, we, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, are Jesus for the world. The confidence – 'with faithness' – in which we live the Christian life points to our eternal life which continues before and after our earthly death. The hope in which we live and die is that in Christ we have been raised from death and in Christ we will be raised through death.

That may not diminish our sufferings, but it focusses our hope. That may not lessen the devastation of deaths which are tragic and unlooked for, but it surrounds those deaths and gives them meaning and context. Though our epitaphs may look back to what we were, the two I've spoken about are confident in what we are and look forward to what we will be. The tomb is empty, and we are all the writing – the only epitaph – there needs to be. Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.