

25th April 2022

Epitaphs

**“Here lies one who meant well, tried a little, failed much:
surely that may be his epitaph, of which he need not be ashamed.”**

Robert Louis Stevenson, Across the Plains, ‘A Christmas Sermon’

Many years ago, I attended a “mid-ministry” weekend where, together with other clergy and guided by wise facilitators, there was an opportunity to review our years of service, assess present circumstances and try to clarify future choices. It was challenging, enlightening and affirming.

Towards the end of the weekend when a depth of trust had been established, one of the exercises was around this question: “What would you want written on your gravestone?” It was about epitaphs, and what might summarise who we were, what we’d achieved and how we would wish to be remembered. I won’t share what I came up with, partly because it’s too personal, but also because it’s changed over the years. But it remains an interesting question: What would you wish your epitaph to be?

Might it be Stevenson’s quoted above, or something else of which we “need not be ashamed”? And what about these?

Dorothy Parker: *Excuse my dust!* H G Wells: *God damn you all: I told you so!* W C Fields: *Here lies W C Fields. I would rather be living in Philadelphia.* Bette Davis: *She did it the hard way.* W S Gilbert: *His foe was folly and his weapon wit.* Bing Crosby: *He was an average guy who could carry a tune.* Maurice Bowra: *Without you, Heaven would be too dull to bear, and Hell would not be Hell if you are there.* M R Burch: *I lived as best I could, and then I died. Be careful where you step: the grave is wide.*

Funny or serious, poignant or pithy, what would you write for yourself? As you work on that, here’s a final thought to muse on today ... In *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare has Hamlet say to Polonius:

*Good, my Lord ... After your death you were better
have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.*

So, as you take time to ponder your epitaph and decide whether good or bad things might be written on your gravestone, let this moment of pondering your mortality make you turn again to life, to ensure you live in such a way that there can be no ill reports of you in the here and now.

A prayer for today

Lord, what would I say of myself, when what you say of me is more important? Amen