

**“On Death and Resurrection”
A Homily for Mac Gatch
July 8, 2023
The Very. Rev. Tracey Lind
St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA**



“The ability to ask beautiful questions--often in very un-beautiful moments--is one of the great disciplines of a human life. And a beautiful question starts to shape your identity as much by asking it as by having it answered.”¹

The poet David Whyte captured some of the essence of our friend Mac Gatch. Mac asked and struggled with big and beautiful questions, including the nature of death.

¹ I heard David Whyte offer these words in an interview with Krista Tippett, *On Being*, April 7, 2016

Mac was a man of his time and history. He was a priest, a scholar, an educator, an administrator, and a librarian. He was a writer, a gardener, and a beachcomber. He was a lover of food, wine, art, travel, music, and of course, Georgie and their brood. He was, as evidenced today, a father, grandfather, godfather, brother, friend, and colleague to an expansive circle of people. He was also a thinker - a curious and deep thinker - who asked and wrestled with big questions, including perhaps, the biggest of all - what happens to us after we die.

As one of Mac's friends and students, and his successor here at the Chapel, I've struggled about what to say today. How does one honor one's mentor at his burial, especially a mentor who didn't believe in the traditional concepts of heaven, hell, purgatory, the afterlife, or immortality? Perhaps, I best share with you the thoughts of my teacher in his own words.²

In 1969, at the age of thirty-seven, a newly minted doctor of philosophy, Mac wrote a somewhat audacious and certainly ambitious book entitled, *Death: Meaning and Mortality in Christian Thought and Contemporary Culture*. In a paper delivered a half century later, less than six months after Georgie's death, Mac revisited and reflected on what he called a work of *juvenilia*, and found that he "still quite agreed with" what he had written so long ago.

In true-to-Mac fashion, he announced the following to a group of distinguished friends, colleagues and fellow bibliophiles at his beloved Grolier Club: "I believe that there is no place in Christian faith—especially in our time—for notions of immortality or an active afterlife between death and the resurrection." He said that he couldn't abide by foolish remarks about death and life after death as a reunion with deceased loved ones "up there" or "down there." He detested phrases like, so and so "passed away." All of this, Mac considered to be an avoidance to the reality of death.

After years of extensive biblical study and historical research, Mac concluded that while "Immortality has no place in the biblical worldview...Christian pastors and theologians have not talked about death and its meaning with their flocks, perhaps because our own views of the matter are unformed or because, as pastors, we are fearful of disturbing our parishioners' possibly opposing views." Mac also believed that our funeral and civic rites are contrived in such a way to avoid raising embarrassing questions about the future of [humanity] for fear that the answer might have to be that death is the end of a [human being's] existence."

And, in his own words, "Our liturgies are not much help. Just try to cobble together a funeral rite, including commendation and committal...that is inclusive in language...and does not imply an active afterlife before the resurrection."

So, what did Mac believe about death? How did he answer this big and beautiful question? Here's what he said to a group of friends as an 86 year old man who had just lost his wife to cancer. "Christian hope is based on the resurrection—[that is,] the hope and the certainty that the Creator wills life in this fallen world to be transformed and perfected." Mac believed that resurrection happens here. He wrote, "Life in this world—life defined as both our own life and human history—is like a woman groaning in labor for her final delivery. We do what we can to move our world toward that transformation, and we die knowing...that we have done what we do in sure and certain hope."

² The quotes I offer from Mac are taken from "On Being Mortal - and Being Christian," A paper delivered by Milton (Mac) Gatch on April 14, 2018 at the Grolier Club in New York City.

That's what the Hebrew scripture reading from the prophet Isaiah, appointed by Mac for today, shows us—a vision, a metaphor, of resurrection as “a feast of rich food and well-aged wine.” Mac came to believe what we call resurrection, what our Jewish siblings call *Shalom*, will be when war, strife, and hatred are brought to an end; and love, peace and justice prevail. And in the resurrection—the one promised by Jesus, the completed realm of God, this great *Shalom*—we will all, both the living and the dead, be raised in its glory.

The Gospel selected by Mac for this service is Matthew's rendering of the Beatitudes (Mt 5.1-10) in which Jesus tells us how God, the Creator, wants us to live in this world as we work toward and wait for that resurrection—that fully complete realm of God, that great *Shalom*. And the apostle Paul, in his eloquent letter to the Romans, reminds both early Christ followers, and us, that in the meantime, as we work, wait, and watch for the Resurrection—the fully complete realm of God, the great *Shalom*—we should remain convinced that absolutely nothing; no hardship, no pain, not even death; will be able to separate us from the love of God. (Romans 8.37)

Not believing in the active afterlife, but believing fully in resurrection, without denial or deflection, Mac faced his own death. He visited his beloved Florence for one last time, and as he told me in a Facetime visit, was pushed in a wheelchair by family from one end of the city to another without falling out. On his 90th birthday, he feasted with his nearest and dearest on one last gourmet meal prepared by Ceraldi. And then, Mac, who in the words of Edith Wharton, embodied the “fullness of life,” gave himself over to the process of dying and its inevitable conclusion—death.

So, what's left of Mac—an urn of ashes, a collection of books, a beautiful garden, a gathering of friends, and a wonderful family—all reminders of a life fully and well lived, and a life on earth finished at death. But, let us not forget one other essential thing that Mac has left us—that is, hope and faith in the promise of resurrection.

So in Mac's beloved Latin: *Requiem aeternam dona nobis, Domine [Domina], ex lux perpetua luceat nobis.* “Grant eternal rest O Lord/O Lady, and let light perpetual shine upon him.”
Amen.