

BURYING THE DEAD

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

'Let the dead bury their own dead' - that's a well-known saying. But who was responsible for it? Would it surprise you to know that it was Jesus who said it? In a way, I suppose, it seems out of character for him. After all, one of the chief duties we owe to one another is to see that we have a proper burial. Even the body of a dog or a cat should be treated with some degree of care; we certainly wouldn't expect human remains to be tipped out on a garbage heap, or ignored. Yet the command of Jesus stands 'Let the dead bury their own dead.'

In fact, when you look at the story from which these words come, the situation is worse than you might expect. For Jesus had called a man to follow him, and the man excused himself, for the moment only, with the words 'Sir, first let me go back and bury my father.' It was in that context that Jesus replied 'Let the dead bury their own dead.'

It is worse, isn't it? After all, this was a specific occasion; a real father and a real son. As well, we have the fact that it was a father and son. Like it or not, we have extraordinary duties towards members of our own family, and, in particular, our parents. This was fully recognised in the days of Jesus, and yet he was urging this man to avoid an imperative responsibility. The whole saying appears uncharacteristic of the Jesus we know.

Partly, this is because we don't know Jesus.

We are aware that he was a supremely good man, and we therefore create a picture of him in our minds in accordance with what we mean by goodness. But we are not good ourselves, and so our ideas of goodness are often astray. What, then, did Jesus mean?

In the first place it is important to notice that Jesus was not letting us off the hook when it comes to looking after our parents, alive or dead. He reserved some of his strongest criticism of certain of his contemporaries who were using religion as an excuse for neglect of family. No, what he is doing is taking one of the most sacred of all human obligations and comparing it with our obligation to follow him. When that is done, it remains more important to follow Christ than anything else in life, even the burial of a dead parent. Such a choice would almost never occur, of course; but Jesus put it like that so we would get the point.

This tells us two important things. First, that Jesus regarded himself as at the centre of religion. Christianity is not a religion invented by Jesus; it is a religion in which Jesus is worshipped. And he had no hesitation in claiming such a place, even though he was a thoroughly good man.

Second it is a challenge to us. Too many folk are secret Christians, or half-Christians, or fellow-travellers with Christians. This is not enough. If Jesus is anything to you, he must be everything. He calls you, as he called that man, 'follow me.' And no excuse will ever warrant a neglect of that command.

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