

“We seem to give him back to thee, dear God, who gavest him to us. Yet, as thou didst not lose him in giving, so we have not lost him by his return. Not as the world giveth, givest thou, O Lover of souls! What thou givest, thou takest not away. For what is thine is ours always, if we are thine. And life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. Lift us up, O God, that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly; draw us closer to thyself, that we may know ourselves nearer to our beloved who are with thee. And while thy Son prepareth a place for us, prepare us for that happy place, that, where they are and thou art, we too may be; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen.

We just prayed Clifton Mann’s favorite prayer. Several times over the last week, I have heard a particular remark: “He taught us well; we will be okay.”

He taught us well. And it’s certainly true that Clifton was a teacher. He had a great mind, and he had the unusual ability to take his enormous volume of knowledge, and unpack any doctrine, or concept, or historical event and make it accessible or understandable to anyone. Clifton was a gifted teacher.

But it wasn't simply teaching to our intellect which is the impulse behind this remark (that he taught us well; we will be okay); it wasn't simply our learning intellectually about God, and the biblical story, and Church history, and world geography – however true and valuable – he taught us in his life and in his death. He taught us in how he lived.

And he lived without fear. And he lived with gratitude. He lived as if life is a windfall – which it is. Clifton believed the words of his favorite prayer, that “life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.”

Clifton believed THAT – not only intellectually – but deep in his bones. He believed at the cellular level what the Scriptures tell us today: Isaiah declares that the Lord will swallow up death forever. The Psalmist says, “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed the grave, you are there also.” Paul writes the Romans saying that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God. John's Gospel quotes Jesus as saying, “I will lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”

Clifton believed. And so, in Clifton we see someone who is comfortable in his own skin, making no effort to be someone else. We see someone who is downright funny, and very unpredictable as to when and where his humor might be exercised. (Perhaps in another forum, some stories may be shared.)

We see someone who cherishes Jo, and takes delight in their children, grandchildren, and extended family. We see someone who is passionate about the grace, and loving-kindness, and forgiveness, and inclusiveness, and wisdom revealed in Jesus. We see someone who loves the Episcopal Church, and offers himself sacrificially to ministry to and with the people of four congregations, notably St Stephens in Lubbock and St Andrews here in Amarillo.

Clifton believed, and he lived like it, and we love him for it. On his last day of life as we know it many of you made a pilgrimage to the front door of Jo and Clifton's home. You brought cards, and food, and flowers to express your love for Clifton, and Jo, and the Mann family. And as you came to the door, Jo would lean over and tell Clifton you were there at the door. And Clifton would say, "Bless them." The Manns are so grateful for your expressions of love.

Today we feel gratitude and grief, if we are honest. I'm mindful of a story about Jesus and the disciples. It's the story of Ascension Day, the Day when the Risen Lord led his disciples to a place outside Jerusalem, spoke to them for the last time, disappeared inside a cloud, and (as we say in the Creed) ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God.

Right before their eyes Jesus is taken up into heaven, blessing the disciples as he goes. And the disciples (the passage tells us) looked intently up into the sky as he was going.

We can imagine their emotions as they looked upward: the wonder of it all, the awe. To think, one was part of all that – not just this particular spectacular event (the Ascension), but the entire event: the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. One can imagine their sense of gratitude as they reflected on how their lives now had purpose, because of him; how their lives changed by knowing him.

And yet, as they stared up into heaven, surely they wondered if this was such a great moment, after all. Surely, as they stared up into the sky knowing this was a glorious day for Jesus, they wondered, “What about us?”

And then, as they were looking into the sky, two men in white robes appeared out of no-where, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Perhaps the two men in white robes (the angels) are saying: “If you’re looking for Jesus, there’s somewhere else to look. Maybe, instead of looking up, you should look around at each other.”

And that’s what happened. They looked around at each other, and they heard themselves say things that sounded like Jesus. And when they gathered, it was as if someone else was in the room with them – a presence. And it seemed as if the Risen, Ascended Lord was no longer in one place on earth, but rather, everywhere instead.

Birth is not unique to Jesus. Nor is life. Nor is death. Nor is resurrection (we claim). Nor is Ascension, I would suggest. Why look up toward heaven? Look around. Clifton Mann is everywhere: in our hearts, our thoughts, our expressions, our ministries, our prayers, with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven.

For “life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight,” in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

(* I am grateful for the inspiration of Barbara Brown Taylor for “Why look up toward heaven? Look around!”)

+ J. Scott Mayer