
We Die the Way We Live

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

Famous last words! Conrad Hilton, who had assembled the huge hotel empire, the Hilton Hotels, was asked as he lay dying if he had any last words of wisdom for the world. He said, "Yes. Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub."

When Thomas Edison lay dying of pneumonia at his home in Menlo Park, New Jersey, his wife leaned over and asked, "Are you suffering?" He replied, "Just waiting." And then he looked out his bedroom window and declared, "It's very beautiful over there."

What will be your famous last words? I am often asked what death is going to be like. Surely, I have been with a lot of people as they lay dying. I have seen many folks die in many different ways. And here is what I have discovered. Except for the most sudden or dramatic or unusual circumstances –and there are some-- people die in the same way they have lived. The way most people die is the same way they have lived.

People who have lived happy lives generally die fairly happy. People who have lived fairly angry lives generally die angry. People who have lived fairly peaceful lives die rather peacefully. People who have lived violent lives generally die violently.

In scripture, when people prepare to meet their God, when they prepare for judgment of some sort or another, they generally discover that the God they meet is the same one they have been worshipping in their regular lives. Folks who believe in an angry God generally meet an angry God as they lie dying. Folks who believe in a loving God generally meet a loving God as they die. Folks who believe in a generous God generally meet a generous God.

In the parable of the talents according to St. Matthew (25:14-30), a man leaves his country for a time and gives five talents to one servant, two to another, and one to the last. When he returns, the first servant reveals that he has made five more talents. A second servant says he that he, too, has doubled his talents. "Well done, good and faithful servant," says the man, "enter into the joy of your master."

But the third servant comes whimpering up and says, "Here is your talent. I knew that you were a harsh man, and so I was afraid. I hid the talent in the ground." And with that, the first man does reveal himself to be quite a harsh man indeed. He had not seemed harsh to the other two servants. The man was quite generous to the servants who had acted in hope and faith! Yet the same man was harsh to the servant who thought him harsh! Our God acts in the same way we act towards God.

My advice to people who want to die peacefully, then, is that they should start acting peacefully now. Most of us will die in the same way we have lived. Henry Ward Beecher, the abolitionist and clergyman, was esoteric. As he was about to die, he said simply, "Now comes the mystery."

Maybe my favorite last words are those of Lady Astor, in 1964. She was dozing, in and out of consciousness. At one point, she awoke to find herself surrounded entirely by her whole family. "Am I dying," she asked, "or is this my birthday?"

Of course it was her birthday! When we live well, we die well. When we die well, we are born again;

it's our birthday.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.