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Something That Will Last

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

I like to think that I don't have a snobbish, uppity bone in my body. That is, at least until I am disabused of that belief from time to time. For instance, I've always had a thing about artificial flowers. They just bug me. Words like "tacky" come to mind. This is perhaps especially true when I see them on a grave.

An uncle of mine died a few days ago; I've been visiting my Mom, and we were heading out to the cemetery. I saw a big bunch of artificial flowers out in the garage and, trying to be helpful, said, "Should I get rid of these?"

She said, "No, we're going to take them with us to the cemetery to put them on some graves." And then she followed up, "We need to put something that will last."

"Something that will last" . . . those words hung in the air for a while. She had just lost yet another sibling, and she wanted to leave a testament on her

brother's grave that would last longer than the few days real flowers would last.

So much change.

I think of the entreaty from the Collect we say in the church service of Compline, “. . . so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in Your eternal changelessness;” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 133).

Now that is something that will last – God's eternal changelessness. No wonder Scripture and so many of our beloved Christian folk have spoken of God as the port in the storm, or the anchor that will hold, or the lighthouse in the fog, or the solid rock on which one could build.

We are wearied by the changes and chances of this life. We miss people; we miss earlier times in our lives. As a good friend said yesterday, “It's all just going too fast.”

So, there I was, swallowing my uncomfortable snobbishness and “planting” artificial flowers on my uncle's fresh grave. And I thought of him holding me on his lap when I was little and letting me help drive his huge, awesome tractor.

We parceled more flowers to my grandparents' graves, to an uncle's grave who died long before I was born, and to the grave of my long-serving babysitter, who taught me how to tie my shoes.

And I thought again of Mom's words, “We need to put something that will last.”

Of course, even these artificial flowers will be gathered up, perhaps in the fall. But I am always reminded when I am in that classic, country cemetery surrounding a little white Methodist Church, of one tradition of Christian burial. Christians were often buried with their faces towards the east, because it is from the east that Christ, our Redeemer and Friend, was traditionally supposed to come. “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:27).

You can feel that hope in that cemetery. You can feel, truly, something that will last. I give thanks for this faith that is thousands of years old; this faith in which literally millions upon millions upon millions of the bodies of the faithful, from prince to pauper, have been sown in hope and expectation.

I watched the recent funeral for Prince Phillip. It was mostly quite spare, as Royal funerals go, due to pandemic restrictions, but the music was still glorious. Apparently, Phillip himself chose it all. Perhaps as a nod to his late mother, who became an Orthodox nun, the amazing quartet sang the Orthodox Kontakion, the words of which are also in our Anglican burial liturgy.

Give rest, O Christ, to thy servant with thy saints,
where sorrow and pain are no more,
neither sighing, but life everlasting.

Thou only art immortal, the creator and maker of mankind;
and we are mortal, formed of the earth,
and unto earth shall we return.
For so thou didst ordain when thou createdst me,
saying, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

All we go down to the dust, yet even at the grave
We make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. (Book of Common
Prayer, pp. 482-483)

I hope you can hear the resolute hope and defiant expectancy these ancient words convey, the same words you have probably heard proclaimed at funerals at Immanuel.

As Mom and I drove off, I looked back at the graves we had just decorated, and I had to admit those artificial flowers were beautiful, after all. They won't last forever, but they were something, they told the world we had been there, and they aimed to convey some sense of beauty and permanence. And all those graves, and the witness and Christian hope of so many people buried there, point to something of lasting truth, unending love, and unspeakable beauty. Alleluia.

I offer to you the setting of [Orthodox Kontakion](#) from Prince Phillip's funeral.