

REV DR SELWYN HUGHES

27 APRIL 1928 – 9 JANUARY 2006

The following chapters were added subsequent to the death of Selwyn on 9 January 2006. Written by John Peters, they chronicle the outstanding events of the last 18 months of Selwyn's life, his death, funeral and Thanksgiving Service.

‘HE DIED CLIMBING’

SEPTEMBER 2004 – JANUARY 2006

You, dear reader, have just been privileged enough to read Selwyn’s views on the ‘final chapter’ of his life and ministry. Simply entitled ‘Epilogue’, he recorded these views at the beginning of 2004 with the certain knowledge that he was entering the last stages of his earthly pilgrimage. It encapsulates two of the primary emphases of a 60-year Christian experience: the reality of heaven and the incomparable Word of God, which he had since his conversion longed to know more of and communicate and share its truths with others. He recalled in this chapter the gravestone he saw in the Swiss Alps of a young climber, which simply read: ‘He died climbing’. That was Selwyn’s desire, and was indeed fulfilled.

Selwyn’s Epilogue is alive with the certainty that God had prepared a place – specifically for him – in the splendour of heaven, and with the sublime assurance that after death – and only after it – begins the ‘most joyous adventure’ men and women are likely to experience. It was an assurance he shared with C.S. Lewis, an author he frequently quoted, who viewed life after death as the ‘real story’, which ‘goes on for ever’, and ‘in which every chapter is better than the one before’. Selwyn had inevitably thought more about heaven since the onset of his prostate cancer in 1995, but its reality had also been one of his fundamental beliefs since the transforming event of his conversion six decades earlier. Nothing could persuade him that it did not exist and he had often referred to the glory of heaven in

the many books he had authored with such care and scrupulous attention to detail.

It would be remiss to pretend that the final months of Selwyn's life were easy: they were not. Ill health was an ever-present reality, increasing weakness a daily feature of his life as he depended on medication for the control of his physical pain. On the other hand, this period was also remarkable for at least two other reasons. First, because Selwyn, who had for so many years taught people how to live the Christian life effectively, now taught them how to die. This was a process that went on for 18 months, and was deeply encouraging and motivating, especially for his close colleagues at CWR. Throughout this period Selwyn really was aware of God's timing and gracious care in everything that transpired before his death in January 2006. In this period too, he was preparing CWR for life after his death, thus conveying a sense of orderliness and a defined sense of purpose – something that had characterised his whole life, both personally and in ministry.

Selwyn had always considered a healthy attitude towards one's death as one of 'The Four Marks of a Healthy Personality'. This is the title of one of his sermons published in *Spoken From the Heart* (Volume 1), in which he makes this honest statement:

I have often wondered when I will die, where I will die, how I will die. I do not reflect on this in a morbid way but rather out of curiosity. Many know I have an incurable cancer (incurable in human terms) and I have long ago moved into NTBR bracket (not to be resuscitated) when some young, wise and clever white-coated doctor will look me over and decide in his wisdom that I am not worth keeping alive. So for me death is not that far distant. Heaven is becoming more of a reality to me than earth.¹

'He died climbing'

For Selwyn, as for C.S. Lewis, heaven was his 'true country' and what he saw as death was quite simply, as he said himself, 'going to God'. In his sermon, 'Our True Country', in the same volume, he summed up his thoughts like this: 'Roll on eternity when, above all things, we shall see our Saviour's face. And where every chapter will be better than the one before. What a day that will be ... Even so, come Lord Jesus.'²

So his attitude to death and his own mortality was not morbid or sentimental. He faced his terminal illness with grace, courage and absolute confidence in God. His sustaining belief was, again in the words of C.S. Lewis, that 'Heaven was not made for us, we are made for heaven.' He also faced death with his characteristically impish and endearing humour, as Jeannette Barwick, who worked with him at CWR for 20 years, has recorded: 'At the beginning of one of the meetings to launch his autobiography [more of which later], he explained the reasons for his sitting down – that he had prostate cancer, and that as it had gone to the bone of his right leg he was very lame and the prognosis was terminal. He said, "I don't expect I'll die with you this evening, but I probably have not got too long to live."' What an opening gambit, which certainly ensured that those present hung – possibly rather nervously – on his every word!

Secondly, his final 18 months were remarkable because of a number of major events, all of which gave him considerable pleasure, indeed, happiness. It is tempting to say that very few men and women in the last 18 months of their lives have been so blessed and honoured. Four events in particular are worthy of being considered.

1. THE LAUNCH OF *MY STORY*, 15 SEPTEMBER 2004

For many years Selwyn had contemplated writing about his spiritual odyssey that had taken him from the comparative

obscurity of a South Wales mining village to a truly worldwide ministry. The curtailing – through ill health and not because of lack of opportunity – of his preaching engagements and travels, meant that he was able to devote the time and energy needed to the crafting and honing of his autobiography. He brought to the task a lifetime's experience of writing, a sharply observant memory, a devotional thrust and refreshing candour and honesty. A perennial awareness of the grace and goodness of God undergirded everything he wrote in this volume. The finished book was dedicated as a mark of respect and gratitude to the Partners of CWR.

The account of the years 2000 and 2001, to take but two examples, are deeply poignant, indeed unforgettable. In those years Selwyn lost both his sons – John in 2000 and David in 2001 – added to which, of course, he had lost his wife Enid through cancer many years earlier. To have written this volume at a time of physical decline, and doubtless through tears, was a huge feat of discipline and endurance. He was once asked the question, 'Have you ever asked God why He has allowed your wife and sons to predecease you?', to which he replied emphatically: 'NO, never.'

The location for the public launch of *My Story* was, of course, Waverley Abbey House, chosen deliberately because it had been so closely associated with Selwyn's ministry and work. Today it is recognised as a centre of excellence for Christian training in counselling and pastoral care. So on a sun-lit September day a warm welcome was given to Church leaders, representatives of the media, booksellers, CWR Partners, directors and staff plus, of course, Selwyn and several of his family members and friends. The day of the launch gave those present as much pleasure as it manifestly gave him. Mick Brooks, CWR's Chief Executive, explained that CWR was delighted to publish Selwyn's story

because not only had he founded the ministry 40 years earlier, but had been its guiding light and generous benefactor throughout that time, and had influenced a whole generation of Christians through *Every Day with Jesus* and his many other writings. Appropriately too, Mick emphasised the inspirational nature of *My Story*, his hope being that it would encourage and motivate men and women across the world to entrust their lives to God in the wholehearted way that Selwyn had done.

The guest speaker at the launch was the minister, author and broadcaster Steve Chalke, who paid a fulsome tribute to Selwyn's many achievements during a lengthy ministry. He stressed his legendary commitment to the writing of *Every Day with Jesus*, now read in over 130 countries around the world. Steve also referred to Selwyn's unfussy and easy acceptance of other people, how he never stood on ceremony and simply wanted people to call him 'Selwyn'. This unpretentiousness had endeared him to congregations in all the continents of the world (with the exception of Antarctica, which he never visited!), and meant that people trusted him with their most intimate thoughts and feelings and, often too, their problems and sadnesses.

Selwyn's story attracted local and national reviews. The *Farnborough Mail* commended his account for its openness, and this from someone well-known as a 'naturally private person'. It also quoted with approval Lord Carey's comment that 'this book reveals the humble man behind the Christian leader,' adding, 'It is a story that will encourage and bless.'

The Baptist Times linked Selwyn's life to the Welsh Revival of 1904–05, commenting that he was a man 'willing to tend the fragrant shoots of that revival and see them bloom to a global scale'. Attention was also drawn in this review to his 'single-minded attitude to his work and his writing' which was notable for its 'everyday phrases and understandable language'. The