

## The Funeral of Geoffrey Cyril Bingham, 10th June 2009

Rev Dr Ian Pennicook

I wish to draw your attention to the phrase used by the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 33:33, **‘they shall know that a prophet has been among them.’**

While what I say *may* have nothing to do with the context of Ezekiel’s ministry, this phrase, I believe, has great significance for us here today as we meet to publicly acknowledge the physical death, and then later reverently to inter the body, of a great man, Geoffrey Cyril Bingham, who was born on 6th January 1919 and who died on 3rd June 2009.

We know a lot about Geoff’s life from the many things he has written and said. Few men have so openly discussed their family life as he did. It is therefore important that I begin by saying how much I and all of us feel for *Laurel*, and for *Richard and Sue*, *Carol and David*, *Anne and Erik*, *Liz and Geoff* and *Mary-Grace* at this time, as well as for the grand-children and great-grand-children. No matter how much we may expect death, when it comes we are still struck with a great sorrow and a sense of loss. And that is *right*. Laurel and Geoff were married on 25th May 1946 and we cannot and should not treat 63 years of ‘one flesh’ as if it was unimportant. Far from it, their ministry *together* was highly significant. Geoff would never have done what he did without Laurel, while her own unique ministry has always had the stamp of their union upon it. I and many others will testify to that with great gratitude to them both.

We also know much of Geoff’s time as a soldier and prisoner of war. Those experiences alone make his surviving to the age of 90 an extraordinary matter!

But great age and great achievements are not the final issue for us this morning. And I am speaking now to the whole church of God represented here. There are things that can and must be said to the family alone, and there are things that should no doubt be said to Geoff’s many close friends, who also quite properly grieve. But to us as the church I say, **a prophet has been among us.**

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Within the Scriptures there are many prophets presented. They came from different backgrounds and spoke to different times and situations. They did so because *God* spoke to them and set them in their places. **‘No prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’** (2 Peter 1:21). God himself put his word in their mouths and God himself commanded them and energised them to speak it.

While not including him among the biblical prophets, nonetheless it is true that Geoffrey Bingham was a man called by God to bring a word to the church in this land — and across the world — in our times. Furthermore, his ministry was not limited to one particular topic or issue. He was a man outstandingly gifted as a leader and teacher in the church and also as an evangelist. But what always came through his ministry was not just the power of his personality. That was without doubt very strong. What impacted men and women was the word of God himself. This is not the time for debate, but for saying that Geoffrey Bingham’s knowledge of the Scriptures was quite amazing and his refusal to work outside those parameters was emphatic.

Although he read very widely, he was never a man who dazzled you with his learning. He was a man through whom the living God spoke. Anyone who ever tried to copy him, so as to achieve the same effects, would soon be exposed, as were the seven sons of Sceva who are described in Acts 19.

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There is a temptation at times like this to elevate a person in an inappropriate way. His words and writings can be treated as authoritative and our memory of him becomes almost like dreaming of a golden age. That is a mark of a cult and should be repudiated by us all. Right now!

Geoffrey Bingham was a man, a human being, and one who knew all the weakness that flowed from his being ‘in Adam’. He was a man with a history, sometimes glorious for sure, but at other times his history was simply the chronicle of pain and suffering. He was, to a certain extent anyway, a bit like Jacob in the story in Genesis 32, when that man was given a painful limp so that he might learn to be a man of God. And, like the apostle Paul, Geoff’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ never left him, so that he might learn the meaning of the phrase, ‘**My grace is sufficient for you**’.

This was also true in the experiences of daily life. Geoff and Laurel have never been wealthy, and it was only a few years back, when the Australian government gave an amount of money to former prisoners of war, that Geoff told me that for the first time he had been able to give a gift to his children. Yet always they knew God’s provision to them — not ‘prosperity’ but the Father’s generous ‘providence’.

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The knowledge that **grace is sufficient** was especially true in the matter of forgiveness. Like every other prophet Geoffrey Bingham was a sinner. Sometimes it was obvious to others, but always it was obvious to him. I can recall many conversations which we used to have, when he would tell me of the constant accusations that the evil one would level against him. It would seem unreal to me to be reminding ‘the great Geoffrey Bingham’ of the truths of forgiveness. But that is the way it is with sinners. And to quote him, when he last preached in public, ‘We never get beyond Romans 7’.

If we are foolish enough, we can, of course, spend time remembering a person’s failures. All the prophets had them. We can think of Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Jonah. But what we may *not* do is remember those failures as guilt! It was a prophet whose behavior had been particularly ugly who wrote: ‘**Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered**’ (Ps. 32:1).

If nothing else, Geoffrey Bingham was a man who preached the Cross! The word of the cross came to me and to so many, with great power, through Geoff’s proclamation.

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Another feature of a prophet is that he or she is a *gifted* person. There is no doubt that Geoffrey Bingham had vast abilities. He was 72 years old when he was awarded his Doctorate in Theology! His capacity to ‘out-think’ others was renowned. And he was usually correct. He had an instinct for truth. (However, I should add that he was never a heresy hunter; that was never a priority.) His ability to read and absorb what he read

was overwhelming to lesser minds. But in all that, he was, like the Apostle Paul, dependent on the word being *given*. So Paul wrote: **‘Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a word may be *given* to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel’** (Eph. 6:19). Years of experience, as well as vast, and what we might call, *natural* abilities, could never replace the constant need for the gift of God.

There is no place for pride in a prophet. And, to use his own quaint way of expressing it, Geoff knew — and taught *us* — that ‘every thing comes to us *gift-wise*’. Or, in biblical words: **‘For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?’** (1 Cor. 4:7). If there was fruit in Geoff Bingham’s ministry, it came *though* him and not *from* him. He told us many times of his encounter with the promise of Jesus: **‘If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who *believes* in me, as the scripture has said, “Out of his inner man shall flow rivers of living water”’** (John 7:37-38). He believed the promise and the rivers flowed.

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So, if there is an overriding mark of a prophet it is not his prosperity, or his ministerial success, or his suffering, or even his holy living. It is his *faith*. The prophet is a man (or woman) who has, and continues to have, a personal encounter with God and who therefore speaks because he believes God and so is *impelled* to proclaim.

It was faith-induced passion that we saw in Geoffrey Bingham: **‘an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!’** (1 Cor. 9:16). Many of us had difficulty keeping up with him, but he was one who, like Peter and John, **‘could not but speak of the things [he had] seen and heard’** (Acts 4:20).

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Yet there is more, for **‘faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’** (Heb. 11:1). Some of us may know that over the last twelve months, Geoff Bingham continued to write. He wrote a sizeable work, entitled ‘Finding the Father: Living in the *Telos*’. And he wrote it all by hand, too. Some of it is the retelling of stories of the past, but yet it is different, because there is that one element, knowledge of the purpose of God, that transforms the past from being a mere recounting of events into being an awareness of the *telos*, the goal of all things, and therefore an understanding of the way all things have meaning in that. But Geoff’s testimony is revealing, in that the goal of God can be known *now*. Living in the *telos* is the reality now brought to us through faith. The Apostle Peter put it: **‘Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorified joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls’** (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Although he was physically weak and most often in pain, so that his body died, as it had to, I suggest that Geoff’s departure from this mortal life into immortality was seamless. As Jesus said, **‘He who lives and believes in me will never die’** (John 11:26). To be **‘absent from the body and present with the Lord’** is an expression of confidence, that what we now know will not end at our physical death. As Geoff was present with the Lord in his physical life, so that reality has only been continued. ‘More happy, but not more secure...’, or in the words of Psalm 73:24, **‘You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory’**

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**A prophet has been among us.** Geoffrey Bingham was a man, a mortal man, who, with all the saints gone before, now awaits the resurrection of the body. He was a sinner whose only confidence was that his great high priest, whose name is Love, ever lives and pleads for him. He was a man who sometimes expressed doubts in the midst of his faith, even with the evidence of God's work through him demonstrated in the lives and ministries of so many.

But one thing is certain: Our response, as the church, and as individuals, must not be to the prophet *but to the word the prophet brought*. If we are to learn from Geoffrey Bingham, it will be as we *believe* the word of God and embrace that word — as it embraces us. To honor the man is good, but we must not forget that: **'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever'** (1 Pet. 1:24-25).

We will *not* honor the man if we do not rise up in repentance and faith and respond to the word given by God through him. If we fail to *hear* that word, then the context of Ezekiel's word may *indeed* have application for the church today:

**As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls, and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to a neighbor, 'Come and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.'**

**They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this [judgment] comes — and come it will! — then they shall know that *a prophet has been among them* (Ezek. 33:30-33).**

(Ian Pennicook  
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