

Double Life

I have always been interested in obituaries.

How do you sum up a whole life – its highs and lows, tears and joys – with mere words?

How do you determine the actions and qualities that should be celebrated and remembered, and those that should be forgotten?

I read such a tribute recently, for a fairly young man who had died unexpectedly in violent circumstances.

His eulogy claimed that he would risk everything, even life, for his loved ones, and was fiercely protective of his family.

He was known for his strong sense of justice, and was quick to stand up for what he believed was right.

He was acknowledged as a deeply devoted father and step-father, fondly remembered as “the best daddy in the world.”

He told friends he had always felt proud of the man he saw in the mirror.

After losing his older brother in his teens, he vowed to dedicate his life to achieving enough good things for two.

His wife praised him as loyal, and always there to lift her up and give her confidence.

He loved to make people laugh.

He was generous to friends and family, always willing to help out with money and practical support.

His eulogy summed him up as “a special smile, a special face, a special man we can’t replace.”

In response to reading that, I thought “what a shame that a man like that should die so young.”

That same week, I read an account of the funeral of another young man who had also died tragically.

His story was so different.

It seemed he had dropped out of high school, and lived on government benefits, supplemented by drug dealing.

By his twenties, he made a bid to corner the market in amphetamine trafficking, and in the process was shot, but not killed, by a rival dealer.

He developed an escalating reputation as a thief, stealing thousands of dollars and drug-making machinery.

He shot and killed the man who had shot him.

He shot and killed that man’s father, then shot and killed the man’s drug-dealing business partner.

He was known to have conspired in the murder of two more drug-dealers, and was suspected (but not convicted) of up to two more murders.

His violence was credited with starting a drug war which resulted in 27 deaths.

He involved members of his family in his trade, leading to his father and stepson both serving prison terms, and his mother dying of an overdose.

He gloated about his misdeeds, claiming it was all worth it because he “won the war.”

He died, unashamed of anything he had done.

We might feel justified in believing that the world is well rid of such a man.

The challenge in these two accounts is that they are both describing the same life.

How is it possible that one person could have two such opposite parts?

And yet it seems to me that the same is true of all of us.

We have the self-pleasing part of us which is greedy, unruly and unteachable.

Yet deep, deep within us, often well-disguised and hidden, there is the “God-breathed” part of us which longs for something more, and strains towards greater things.

It’s only through accepting the amazing sacrifice of Jesus, who freely gave His perfect life in place of our imperfect ones, that our true self is set free.

His broken body and poured-out blood paid the ransom, the price demanded, so we could leave our dark side behind, and embrace the person we were always intended to be.

That’s what this communion is all about.

It’s our chance to pause together and let God know how grateful we are that He gave His Son for us, and to tell Jesus how much we value the abundant life He has bought for us.