

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit

A sermon preached by the Revd Jo Coney on the second Sunday of Trinity, 5 June 2016.

Readings: 1 Kings 17: 17-end; Galatians 1:11-end; Luke 7:11-17

Our Gospel and Old Testament readings this morning are in some ways very similar: two widows, each with an only son who dies and are brought back and returned to their mothers. In **KINGS** we read of the widow of Zeraphath – and of Elijah restoring her son to her. And in **LUKE** the widow of Nain – whose son Jesus restores to his mother.

It is perhaps worth noting that Jesus' motive on this occasion is pure compassion and nothing is said of the faith of the widow or of her son. But this story does make it abundantly clear that the Christian conviction is that **life** comes through encounter with Jesus - the one who is to die himself and then be raised for all people and for all time - stating very clearly that we shall all be raised with him to eternal life

So both these stories, confront us with the inescapable fact of our own death and demand that we think, feel and pray about it and don't shy away from facing it. But in our culture, death has been named as the last taboo of our time. It is perhaps the one thing that we fear to bring into the open, to look straight in the face and to ask:- Just what is death? and how do we think about our own death? And indeed the death of those we love ? To ask what is beyond death? and crucially to explore how we approach it - do we dread it – or do we look forward to it?

Surely the bottom line is to be clear and honest with ourselves as we confront the question, *“Do we really believe the Gospel - the gospel that says that we shall be raised to eternal life?”* As of course we say we do every time we say the creed and declare that *“We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come”*.

For if we ignore the fact of our death, and don't think about it or prepare for it, then we run the risk of living only in this present earthly existence with our eyes firmly on the horizon of our physical death while our Christian faith demands that we live with our horizon fixed *beyond* this world - enabling us to live with our eyes fixed constantly on the eternal life we are promised.

In a recent article in the **Church Times** we are urged to talk about death much more than we do – to confront and challenge this last taboo, and to create, within our churches, safe places where we can discuss and explore together how we feel about it. And thus to help each other look forward and prepare for our own death both practically and spiritually.

In his recent book *“At the end of the day – enjoying life in the departure lounge”* the Revd David Winter reflects that death in our culture too often seems to us to only happen to other people - victims of war, celebrities, and of course those personally known to us. And that we try to put the mystery of death into a context we can understand and cope with by talking about the Pearly gates and making jokes about who St Peter will let in and who he won't .

Winter uses the analogy of a railway and leads us to ask ourselves if we see death as more of a terminus, an end, or as junction leading to another journey. As an end or as a new beginning. Not as a purely physical event but as a profoundly spiritual one.

One way of trying to imagine what death might be is to see dying as in many ways the same as being born. As before birth, so before death. A baby in the womb cannot possibly imagine what the human life they are coming into involves. It is totally unimaginable, getting there is painful and it involves leaving the familiar safety of a warm and protected womb. No wonder the first thing they do is cry!

So perhaps we feel that the experience of death might be very much the same, one of being thrust into an existence totally impossible to imagine and through a process almost certainly involving pain, leaving the familiar and known life in this world for something totally unknown, mysterious and completely beyond the capacity of our human brains to begin to understand or visualise.

So, like the baby, no wonder we are reluctant to be moved out of the familiar and into the unimaginable.

Jesus promises us eternal life but said nothing about how extensive it is, or where it is, or what it looks like. But he made it absolutely clear that God his father is there, heaven is where he is and where his perfect will is done. A place where we're promised that we shall be more alive than we have ever been, that we'll be more loving and more loved than is possible in this world, and where our relationship with our creator and Saviour comes to completion and we can embrace the very ground of our Christian hope.

We cannot know what life beyond this world will bring except for the certainty that it is far beyond our human imagining. But we can believe that it is a reality and we can be absolutely sure of the promise given us by God, that we will find there a loving welcome, freedom from all pain, and peace. And we can be convinced that there is nothing on this earth or beyond that can ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ in which we are all held - whether we are aware of it or not.

Some of you may remember an evangelist called David Watson who led the Belfry Evangelical Community in York some years ago. He died at a relatively early age of a particularly aggressive cancer. Many Christians around the world were praying for, and fully expecting, his recovery and there was an enormous wave of a sense of betrayal by God when their prayer was not answered in the way they believed it would be. David did not recover - he died. But as David approached death, he wrote a very moving book about how his faith was changed and deepened during that time. His view of death changed completely. Very clearly and concisely, he described **how** his faith had changed and how he had moved from wanting desperately to live - but being prepared to die - to now wanting to die but being prepared to live. So he finally approached death, not just with strengthened faith, but with complete peacefulness.

Thinking about death also leads us to ask **what of grief?** How might we deal with the death of those we love?

Our readings tell us just what a tragedy it was for our two widows to lose their sons, and we know that Jesus himself wept for his dear friend Lazarus. When someone we love dies of course we shall miss them, and the pain of that loss cannot ever be overestimated. The pain of grief is a very personal thing. We all experience and deal with it in our own way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. However we deal with it, one thing is sure. We'll all need each other's gentle and tactful support and love as we learn to live without those whom we have loved and who have died, and whose physical presence we will always miss acutely

Saying goodbye and letting go of someone so loved is hard – perhaps the hardest thing we are ever called to do. Nothing can take away the grief we feel. Our pain is real, but so is our love. Our love for them that can never die, never diminish, and that will never leave us. Our loss will always be with us and we shall never forget but we shall gradually learn to live more alongside it. Eventually the acute pain we feel will be overtaken by the many happy memories we treasure and in thankfulness for all the precious things we shared with them in this life.

St Paul tells us that that in this world we see God through a glass darkly – but then we shall see Him face to face. So our ponderings might be around exploring questions such as: *“In the light of Christ's promises, is death something we look forward to and get excited about or is it something we fear? Do we welcome death as our ultimate healing or dread it as ultimate suffering? Or do we just sweep the whole subject of death under the carpet and ignore it because thinking about it is too difficult and maybe too frightening?”*

But as we **do** think and pray about it, surely the vital, immediate question which inevitably follows is “How does the prospect of death, how we understand and approach it, change the way we live in this life, here, now, today and everyday?”

We shall all die but none of us know when or how. It may be suddenly or it may be slowly and painfully. It may not be for many years, or it might be today. As I ponder the mystery of death and how I might approach my own death, I am hugely helped to grow in confidence and trust that all will be well by following the example of someone very very dear to me, A Bishop, who died recently. During his last few hours while he drifted in and out of consciousness, he surrendered himself completely into God's hands by repeating again and again the prayer found in the service of Compline (night prayer).

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I pray that God may grant me, and all of us, the grace and courage to do the same

Amen