

Sermon on “Death” for Advent II, 9th December 2007

This is the first sermon I’ve preached in Advent for quite a few years. We usually make way for guest preachers. So here I am sandwiched between Daniel Johnson and Ann Widdecombe. Advent is the season for thinking about *The Four Last Things*, and one of these things is death. Often, when we get a memorial service at St Michael’s, we are asked for that poem by Henry Scott Holland: *Death Is Nothing At All*. It begins: *Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room.*

This maudlin drivel was brilliantly satirised by Victoria Wood in an episode of *Dinner Ladies*. A woman goes to the hospital to see her husband. The nurse says, *I’ve got some very bad news*. The wife replies, *What, is he dead then?* The nurse says, *No, no, no, he’s not dead – he’s just in the next room*. But as Victoria Wood says, *You can of course be in the next room AND dead!*

Or the disappearing Cleveland canoeist: *I’m not dead; I’m just holed up in the next room!*

The philosopher Lucretius pointed out that, for materialists such as himself, death is nothing to be afraid of. He said, *Where I am, death is not; and where I’m not, death is*. I suppose most people today are materialists. They don’t believe there is anything after death – because they think that our minds or souls are nothing but the soft-wear programme of our material bodies; and that when the body dies, the mind and soul cease too.

Fair enough, if that’s what they want to believe. But how is it then that materialists – those who deny there is any existence after death – still feel very queasy about death? If death means the end of all consciousness, what is there to be queasy about? It’s not as if you’ll be there saying, *Gosh, isn’t it awful being dead!* Because the materialist defines death as not being.

But still the unease, the queasiness, persists even in the most diehard – so to speak – materialist. Tom Stoppard put it very amusingly in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*:

Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?

No.

Nor do I, really. It’s silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it as like being alive in a box. One keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead...which should make a difference, shouldn’t it?

I mean, you’d never know you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being asleep in a box. Not that I’d like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air – you’d wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box.

Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you’d be in there forever. Even taking into account the fact that you’re dead... Ask yourself, if I asked you straight off, I’m going to stuff

you in this box now, would you rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you'd prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life – I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking, Well at least I'm not dead...

Of course, the origin of Tom Stoppard's comedy is the greatest tragic play in English – *Hamlet*. And here Shakespeare puts the queasiness issue decisively:

*To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause*

Now the Christian faith says that death is not natural, as Lucretius thought. St Paul spells it out, *By man came death*. Death is something that came into the world with that first catastrophe which is described in the Bible as The Fall. Death is not a natural event: it is the wages of sin. But, says St Paul, cheer up! This is not the whole story. *For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead...and as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*

St Paul was not only an apostle and missionary: he was a great philosopher and as such he knew the scorn that unbelievers, materialists, pagans would pour on his teaching about the resurrection:

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?

St Paul's answer is uncompromising:

Thou fool! That which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die...so also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is won in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body... for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

This process – death – is painful and terrifying. It is not *nothing at all*. Remember how when Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was dead, St John tells us – in the shortest verse in the whole Bible – *Jesus wept*. If even Jesus wept, knowing what he would do, how much more must we weep and suffer over the reality of death? Jesus and the death of Jesus is the full and perfect answer to the questions raised by Mr Stoppard and Mr Shakespeare: *He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again.*

The ancient liturgy of the Church, in the prayers for All Souls' Day tells it as it is. There is no *Death is nothing at all* here, no downplaying the reality of death. It says starkly:

Dies irae, dies illa...Day of wrath and doom impending. Because the compilers of the Mass for All Souls knew that, when death is downplayed, the resurrection from the dead is worthless. So in that great rite we are taken through terror and near-despair, judgement and the whiff of brimstone before we arrive finally at:

Lord, all pitying, Jesus blest, grant them thine eternal rest.

In the Litany we pray to be delivered from *sudden death*. I know many pray this rather sheepishly. Because it is the wish of most not to have to endure a long and painful dying. Most people would like to die peacefully, quietly in their sleep - but of course *not yet*. We are like the little boy who asked his granddad, *How old are you?* And his granddad replied, *Eighty-nine*. And the little boy said, *Ooh, I don't want to be eighty-nine!* And his granddad said, *You will when you're eighty-eight!*

What the Litany means when we ask to be delivered from sudden death, is to be delivered from unprepared death. We must hope not to enter into the nearer presence of God and his judgement with our hearts unexamined, our sins unconfessed. We must prepare. One of the greatest comforts a priest can render his people is the final prayers, the Last Rites, such as I was privileged to provide for Richard last week.

For death and life are indissolubly mixed as part of the one reality. We are called to set an example by the way we face death, as we are called to give an example by the way we live. It is unavoidably a difficult journey. But it ends in triumph. It ends like this:

In paradisum deducant te Angeli; in tuo adventu suscipiant te martyres, et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Ierusalem. Chorus angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem.

May angels lead you into Paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your coming and lead you to the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive you into eternal rest, with Lazarus who once was poor