

## **Sermon: 29 November 2009 – Death**

In Advent at St. Michael's, we look at the four last things. And, unlike the atheist viewpoint, death is not the last of the last things. Instead, it comes before other things – those being Judgement, Hell and Heaven. So today, we begin Advent by looking at death. However, I shall return to this issue of the correct placing of death in our temporal minds later.

When I was at school, I remember one of my history teachers saying to us that societies tend to be obsessed with either sex of death. According to this view, the stern Victorians could think about nothing other than the end of life whilst we today are in thrall to the other thing.

Modern films about the Victorian era will, if they contain a funeral (and many do), often see a solemn cleric reciting those nonetheless true and beautiful words: "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery". As I say, true and beautiful those words are. But they feed into the modern critique of the Victorian view of death and of the Victorians – that they were excessively morbid, stern, bleak and obsessed with death.

So, if that is the modern critique of the Victorian view of death, what is the modern view? Well, much of this was covered in Peter's sermon on this topic last year. But, let me jog your memory a little. The modern view goes back several centuries – to the slow and complicated emergence of human-centred consciousness (in opposition to God-centred consciousness) in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Once humans placed themselves at the philosophical centre of Creation, they started to get more worried, anxious and queasy about death. However, as this human-centred philosophy led on to secularism and humanism, death became something that they didn't want to talk about very much. After all, if there's no God, there's no afterlife and death is merely nothingness. As the materialist philosopher Lucretius said: "Where I am, death is not; and where I'm not, death is". Nevertheless, these modernists are still profoundly uneasy about death – or at least they fear the process of dying. Woody Allen captured this succinctly when he said: "I don't mind dying: I just don't want to be there when it happens."

But there are two more things to be said about the modern view of death. Firstly, there is an implicit, though rarely stated, belief that science will ultimately deliver us from the biological shortcomings of aging and death. It is difficult to say whether this assumption has contributed to more people choosing to abandon God's pathway to eternal life, but there is no doubt that it does exist.

Secondly, death is used by secularists and atheists as a way of attacking those of faith: 'Why did your loving God allow all those people to be killed in the Asian tsunamis or on September 11<sup>th</sup> or in Iraq or in Rwanda (and so the list goes on)?'. And the Archbishop of Canterbury has seemingly endorsed the validity of this question by stating that the Asian tsunamis caused him to question his faith.

Now, I'm going to come back to the secular philosophical view of death later, but let's deal with these other two points first. With respect to science ultimately defeating death, well this is just nonsense. All things ultimately come to an end – even the very rocks around us eventually cease to exist. Medicine may extend our lifespans, but it will only postpone the inevitable. It goes without saying that this will remain the case even into the distant future. This topic, by the way, is linked to the generally unsettling influence that modern science fiction has exerted in recent decades – but I think that that is a topic for another day.

Moreover, there is an additional point to add on this issue – namely the question of the value of life rather than just its length. Genesis tells us that God decided to shorten men’s lifespans after seeing the amount of evil, wickedness and suffering of which they were capable. Therefore, there is not just bodily death; there is also spiritual death. Hamlet, one of the first characters in history to exhibit human-centred consciousness in its modern form, suffers this. It is the result of his own actions, his sins. Whilst science may cure many diseases and even slow our aging, it won’t cure our Original Sin or save us from the living deaths that are the result of it in the absence of God.

On the second point, well there are many reasons why God permits evil, suffering and death. The desire to allow us free will, the wish to test us and transform us into something better, the existence of Satan are some of them. That again is a subject for another day. But, in addition, God does value our lives and really does protect us from death. However, to see this, we must transform our notions of life and death to the ones that He uses. When we do that, we see that our loving God really doesn’t allow us to die – or at least not unless we ourselves choose it.

So, what are God’s definitions of life and death? John 17: “After Jesus said this, he looked towards Heaven and prayed ... Now this is eternal life: that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent”. Our coming alive is our coming to God, to faith, at Baptism and Confirmation. Before that, we are in Hamlet’s living death, then life begins. “I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” This is the correct way of thinking.

Thought like this, any obsessions we have with sex and death melt away. Sex and death – or to place them in their correct moral contexts marriage and funeral – are merely transitions within this life.

At the marriage transition, we petition God “to send thy blessing upon these thy servants; that they, obeying thy will and alway being in safety under thy protection, may abide in thy love unto their lives’ end”.

After what God probably views as mercifully short time on this fallen Earth, we come to the second transition when we say at Burial that “we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.”

And so on death we may proclaim: “Though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God”.