

We begin our Advent series of sermons on The Four Last Things with today's topic which is death. Death has a curious history in western civilisation: the Jews of the second temple period and the early and Medieval Christians feared death only because they believed it to be the prelude to God's judgement and possible damnation. Modernity does not believe in either judgement or punishment on the other side of the grave – or even on this side of the grave. Generations of educational theorists have encouraged us to use only the concept of reward but not punishment – so revealing a fatal illogicality: for where there is no attachment of blame for wrongdoing, then the concept of praise for doing well is worthless. And the idea of making judgements is outlawed as *judgemental*.

Something odd happened to death in the 16th century. And it happened as a direct consequence of the modern view of reality. Jews and Christians – Muslims too, for that matter – had always believed that reality is to be found in God, and that human beings partake of reality only insofar as they belong to God. In the 16th century all this changed profoundly. The greatest play of our age, the play which set the intellectual and spiritual tone of modernity, is *Hamlet*. And particularly the lines *To be or not to be, that is the question*. But when Hamlet is agonising about being, it is not the being of God he is thinking about, but his own being: Hamlet's being. And, exactly contemporary with Shakespeare, we have the Frenchman Rene Descartes who is very like Hamlet. Descartes makes human consciousness the centre of reality: *Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am*.

It is no wonder that both Hamlet and Descartes feel queasy, indecisive and worried to death. For the centrality of human consciousness – which they invented – includes consciousness of death. And we have gone on feeling queasy ever since. Kierkegaard even defined the essence of human consciousness as *anxiety*. *Angst* is a word so familiar that it's all over the Sunday colour supplements and the health and well-being pages. Freud declared that we are in thrall to *thanatos* – the death instinct. Samuel Beckett couldn't have a shave without seeing the grinning skull in his mirror. Martin Heidegger said our whole existence is *being towards death*. We can joke about it with Tom Stoppard who wrote in *Rosencranz and Guildenstern are Dead* that you wouldn't like to wake up and find yourself alive in a box – and added, *Mind you, it's better than being dead in a box*. But this is black humour, as when Woody Allen says twitchily, *I don't mind dying: I just don't want to be there when it happens*.

All this modern neurosis is entirely understandable. Because, if you make human consciousness the centre of everything, then what is left when this consciousness is extinguished? The humanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment puts too much of a psychological burden on us, and so we become queasy and scared. But the Christian faith says something more revealing. Death, says St Paul, *is the wages of sin*. Now don't start thinking that sin is just particular acts of naughtiness. Sin is the primary – let us say *original* – form of false orientation. It is rebellion against God. And the modern form of this ancient rebellion is precisely that intellectual act by which we centre reality in ourselves rather than in where it truly is – in God. This is our original false consciousness.

In *Choruses from the Rock* T.S. Eliot describes some of the ways in which our false consciousness tries to avoid anxiety and he ends with a fearful warning:

We are:

*Engaged in working out a rational morality
Engaged in printing as many books as possible.
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles
Turning away from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call humanity.
Though you forget the way to the temple
There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not:
You shall not deny this Stranger*

Sin is seeking your reality in anything except God. Sin is making myself the centre of meaning and significance. But this is poor, mortal me. No wonder I feel anxious. Hamlet knew it. Oh Boy, did Hamlet know it: *the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to... What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! ... In action how like an angel! ... The paragon of animals...* But the anxiety of Hamlet's self-consciousness makes him see the whole world as *A foul and pestilential congregation of vapours...* And he himself, poor lad, *This quintessence of dust*. Just like us. We had been warned already by the Bible: *Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*.

Hamlet not only fears death, but he is suffering already a death-in-life. The anxious, queasy, indecisive life which comes through centering reality in his own being instead of in God. This is what St Paul means by *sin*. Sin involves another mistaken perception: the mistaken perception that we move from life towards death. Our Christian faith teaches us the opposite. Through our sin – through this intellectual and spiritual and moral misperception of reality – we are in death already. Jesus Christ is our exemplar. Christianity actually begins with Christ's body in the tomb.

Karl Barth, preaching in a Swiss jail, said:

The great NO; the great shadow that hangs over our lives – the wages of our sin – that is our death – was paid by Christ lying dead in the tomb. This he willed and this he did. Our death occurred on his Cross. The great NO which was meant to strike us, struck the One who was without sin and who, therefore, did not deserve death. Death was executed in Christ's flesh to the bitter end.

We must become aware that there is something worse than natural death. We can perhaps stoically contemplate our natural death with equanimity, as did David Hume who said:

I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire.

But the living death which is sinful is the attempt to be independent of God and to root reality in oneself. This is the queasiness and emptiness which is the source of all

our unease and dread. As Kierkegaard said, it is *The sickness unto death*. This is the result of sin and rebellion against God. It is simply living on false pretences.

St Paul, who diagnosed the sickness, also produces the cure. And the cure is faith. And faith is reorientation, to turn to Christ and have your being rooted in him. Then you will have eternal life with him. That means a life outside time and in Christ. It is a life which death cannot touch. And it is not pie in the sky. It starts now – as soon as you decide to find your reality in Christ. Then the first thing that you are freed from is that self-centred, neurotic fear of death.

Can you bring yourself to give up false consciousness and have faith? There are things that help us do this. One great help is the service for *The Burial of the Dead* in *The Book of Common Prayer*. This book is a treasure because throughout its pages it offers penetrating psychological and spiritual descriptions of what it is to be human. The Prayer Book has us bang to rights. Are we to suppose that this great and inspired book which understands our lives so perfectly will suddenly lose its mind when it speaks to us about death? Of course not. So listen and be comforted by Christ's words from the Collect from *The Burial of the Dead*:

Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the Kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world: grant this we beseech thee O Merciful father through Jesus Christ our Mediator and Redeemer. Amen.