Sunday 14th November – Death and dying

(Remembrance Sunday)

Welcome

Family News – GB, t&c, Weds eve study, Thurs pm study. Saturday – Tearfund Big Quiz Night, on zoom – let me know if you want to join! (Make up leaflets?)

* Points from the church meeting last week:
  + Harvest fund still open until the end of this month – proceeds will be going to TWAM (Tools with a mission) – show leaflet if people want to know more
  + It’s coming up to that time of year again! Need to talk about Christmas. Boxing Day this year will be on a Sunday, we know that a lot of people have family stuff at that time, so Straw poll – **if we have a service in the church** on Boxing Day, who is likely to be here? No judgement! Is that any different if we have a service on zoom?
  + GB are holding a Christmas Fayre on 11th Dec. Debbie will be asking for volunteers for things like refreshments, and possibly prizes/stuff to sell, so have a think about whether you might be able to help with any of that.
  + Anything else?
  + Finally, I want to ask a question, for you to think about over the next few weeks, because I will come back to it in a few weeks’ time; those of you who have been doing Bible studies will know where I’m going with this. In your Christian life, what is it that you are passionate about? Are you passionate for people to know the gospel? Are you passionate about teaching, or caring for people, or standing up against injustice? Are you passionate about caring for creation? Just have a think about that over the coming weeks, pray about it and we’ll come back to it in December.

Prayer – Lord, as we gather today in your name, in the building or on zoom, may we know your presence with us. In praise would you life us up; in prayer would you meet our needs; in your word would you speak, encourage and restore us. May our service this morning, and all that we do throughout the week, be to your praise and glory. Amen.

21 And can it be

We begin today in prayer with our prayer box.

We will continue in prayer in a while for specific prayers around conflict.

I want to tell you a story this morning. It’s a story about King David. His son, Absalom, had turned against him; he wanted to be king himself, and had got together an army and driven David and David’s followers out of Jerusalem. David was afraid, humiliated, betrayed; and Absalom’s army still followed them – he needed David dead.

David had a lot of men around him, and they went out to fight. The commander of the army killed Absalom, and he sent a man from a place called Cush to tell David the news.

2 Sam 18:31-19:4

**31**Then the Cushite arrived and said, ‘My lord the king, hear the good news! The Lord has vindicated you today by delivering you from the hand of all who rose up against you.’

**32**The king asked the Cushite, ‘Is the young man Absalom safe?’

The Cushite replied, ‘May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man.’

**33**The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: ‘O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!’[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+sam+18%3A31-19%3A4&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-8512a)]

**19**[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+sam+18%3A31-19%3A4&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-8513b)]Joab was told, ‘The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.’ **2**And for the whole army the victory that day was turned into mourning, because on that day the troops heard it said, ‘The king is grieving for his son.’ **3**The men stole into the city that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle. **4**The king covered his face and cried aloud, ‘O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!’

I tell you that story this remembrance Sunday morning because it is a story of war, a story of death and grief. It is a story of a man whose enemy was killed – the enemy who wanted to kill him – and who returned to his throne victorious. The messenger brought the good news: ‘Your enemy is dead! You are safe! The fight is over!’

But David recognised, not just the relief from war but the grief of death, even the death of his enemy. And when we think today of the wars of the past, as well as those ongoing in the present, there must be a grief associated with that. A grief for loss of life, on all sides. We can be blinded by numbers to forget that these are actual people – friend or enemy – people with loves and fears, families and problems. Some fight for what they believe in, some just follow orders, but all endure hardship and grief and pain.

That grief and pain grieves God, and it should grieve us. So we come in prayer for those in the midst of conflict at this time, whatever ‘side’ they are on, and we cry out to God for peace.

Lord, I want to thank you for this story. A story of love for enemies, even before the days of Jesus. And Lord I want to lift to you those in situations of conflict right now. Those countries where men and women are still fighting, still hurting, still grieving. Those families enduring the uncertainty of knowing that their loved ones are away at war. Those communities living in fear of what is happening around them. Lord, I pray for your hand to touch lives, to bring hope and comfort and strength. I pray for those in authority, that they might be moved to peace. May those in power learn love, peace, forgiveness, healing. May we see the day when swords are beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks, when your peace reigns, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

We sing again: abide with me (4-5 mins)?

(After our 2 minute’s silence) I am going to read to you a poem by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, a chaplain in WWI. He was known as ‘Woodbine Willy’ for his sharing of cigarettes with the soldiers as well as his care for them on the front lines. As he reflected on his experiences, after the war, he reflected on that grief of war, and death, and loss. And he reflected on the suffering of God, as the only way to make sense of the suffering of humanity.

But first can you stand if you are able for the silence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Re9Pr-Krcaw>

The children are going to leave us now.???

Poem: The suffering God

As the writer ends that poem in a note of hope, that in God’s sorrow, in the shadow of the cross, is light and shelter and a future, so we sing again:

736 God sent his Son

Reading: Rom 6:1-14

We continue our sermon series on life events today, and it’s not getting any easier! Because today I want to talk about something that no one **ever** wants to talk about, and that is death and dying. To make it just a bit harder, I’m going to try at this point **not** to talk about resurrection, which is next week’s topic. But I don’t want this to be a terribly down-beat sermon!

Because the fact is, death is a part of life. The ultimate certainty. We will all face it. But what worries us, I think, is that not only is it the ultimate certainty but we think it is the ultimate unknown. No one has been through it and lived to tell the tale (except Jesus, but he wasn’t very forthcoming on the details). I don’t know about you, but I know that I hope in the resurrection, which as I said we will come to next week. It’s not what happens **after** death that bothers me; it’s the process of death itself.

For something so inherently natural, it seems so **un**natural, doesn’t it? Perhaps there is something cultural in that – we are sheltered from the reality for most of our lives, until it intrudes uncomfortably into our consciousness. A few years ago, we visited an old abbey in Scotland and I was fascinated to see on their gravestones symbols of death and judgement – a message of ‘you too will die’ – rather than words of hope. But I wonder if that message of dying is a message we do need to hear.

Firstly, we need to hear it because it reminds us to **live**. Tony used to have a favourite song, which we played at his funeral, which is called, ‘Live like you were dying’. It speaks of a man who received a terminal diagnosis, and proceeded to make the most of the time he had left – literally ticking off his ‘bucket list’ – and he concludes with the words, ‘Some day I hope you get the chance, to live like you were dying.’ In life, we do have to plan for tomorrow – but we can’t always assume tomorrow will be there. The writer of Ecclesiastes repeatedly tells us that ‘it is appropriate for a person to **eat**, to **drink** **and** to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given them – for this is their lot.’ (Ecc 5:18) Life is a gift from God.

But secondly, we need to hear it because it reminds us **how** to live. The letter to the Hebrews says, “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement.” Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, “The sting of death is sin”.

Now that doesn’t sound like very good news, does it? If my deeds are going to be judged, if God is going to confront me with every sin and failure, no wonder the idea of death is daunting! I tell you, if it comes down to “Do my good deeds outweigh the bad ones?” I wouldn’t like to bet eternity on the outcome.

But this is where I want to take you back to today’s reading. Paul says, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

I want to suggest to you today, that death is a 2-stage process. There is the physical death of our bodies, which comes as part of the natural order of things. We can put it off, but we can’t avoid it forever. But there is also a spiritual death. Revelation 21 speaks of a ‘second death’ at the judgement, when God brings justice on those living lives of sin. Elsewhere Paul tells us that we were dead in our sin, before we knew the grace of God in Christ. Dead men (and women) walking, perhaps. ‘Officially’ alive, but destined for death. And it is this **spiritual** death where we find the sting caused by sin. “The wages of sin is death” – not the physical, that comes to everyone, good bad or indifferent, but the spiritual.

And I want to say, that is **Good News!** It is **good news** that there is a spiritual death and a physical death.

Why?

Because we have already been through it! We have **already** died that spiritual death. Paul says, “We died with Christ”, “Our old self was crucified with him.” We were baptised into his death, united with him in his death: we are not “dead **in** sin”, with spiritual death as our destiny, but “dead **to** sin”, with death as our past. We will not be judged in our sinful nature because our sinful nature has been put on the cross with Jesus. As Christians we have **been through** that spiritual death, and who we are now has come out the other side.

We have no fear of judgement, because our judgement has already come. John 3:18 says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned.” We have believed in Jesus, we have died a spiritual death with him on the cross, we have experienced a spiritual new life. For the one whose spirit is no longer tied to sin, where is the sting of death? Paul says to the Corinthians, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” And we will come back to that next week.

We still face temptation, in our bodies. Sin still seeks to get a grip on us. But it has no power over us, no hold on the spirit which has been united with Christ. In this passage Paul writes to the Romans to remind them that they must not allow sin to reign in their bodies now it has no place in their spirit. And we seek to live lives free of sin, so that the actions of our body correspond to the resurrected, born-again life of our spirit. But the body will still die, and those final vestiges of sin with it. And then we are free.

So while we know the pain of death; while we grieve over death that comes to our loved ones and the loss of their presence from our lives; while we acknowledge the goodness of the here-and-now and the loss we will face when we leave that; we recognise that death is not new, and unknown, and something to be feared. We have ‘been there, done that’ at the spiritual level, and we can trust God that he will carry us through it at the physical level too. And if that physical level is painful, and unpleasant, we look again to Christ on the cross – suffering and helpless, the wounded healer, who holds us and comes alongside us in our trouble.

And we remember these words of Paul in Romans 8:31-39:

**31**What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **32**He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? **33**Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. **34**Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. **35**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? **36**As it is written:

‘For your sake we face death all day long;  
    we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+8%3A31-39&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28153a)]

**37**No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38**For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+8%3A31-39&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28155b)] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39**neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray.

Lord God, I praise you that you chose to come, and suffer, and die, that we might have life. Thank you that you have enabled us to die that spiritual death and we need no longer fear your judgement. Thank you that you have promised your presence with us even when we face our own pain and suffering; that you have been there, you know and you understand… Lord, keep us living according to the spirit-life you have given to us, that when you finally release us from these bodies of sin we may love and praise you for all eternity, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let us stand to sing our final hymn – 1753 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, your perfect love is casting out fear.

May the Lord bless you and keep you; may he make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may he turn his face toward you, and give you peace. Amen.