

Death - Advent 1

1 Corinthians 1.8

“He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In Paul’s preamble to his first letter to the Corinthians, before he gets stuck in to the real issues, (which are the divisions within the Corinthian Church, especially divisions between rich and poor), he greets them with an expression of his gratitude to God for all the spiritual gifts that the Church of Corinth enjoys. As he says “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strength you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

For Paul, as James Alison puts it, we are ‘living in the end times’ – waiting for the revealing of our Lord, when ‘he will come in glory to judge the living and the dead’, as today’s collect reminds us and as we shall affirm later in the Creed. We are rightly suspicious of sects who proclaim that the end is nigh, who purport to know when the Lord will return – they don’t seem to realise that when the Lord says ‘you do not know when the time will come’, he means just that. We do not know, and we will not know until it is upon us. And precisely because we cannot predict the time when he will come, we must be constantly ready, watchful, wakeful – slaves of the household, working diligently to be ready whenever the master of the house appears, as the gospel parable suggests.

One of the crises that Paul spoke to in the early Church, was the dismay caused when faithful Christians died. There was real concern that, since they had died before the return of the Lord in glory, they might not share in the promised Kingdom. Paul was emphatic that this was not the case – as he made clear in his first letter to the Thessalonians: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” The dead are not in any way disadvantaged, but neither is the need for watchfulness among the living in any sense reduced – and, indeed, one of the things for which we need to be ready, wakeful and watchful is death itself.

It is a truism that our culture is not very comfortable talking about death, and in a culture which is not comfortable talking about death it is particularly hard to get yourself into a state of awareness and readiness for it. Earlier generations, probably because death was a so much more familiar part of their everyday experience, made preparing for death a much higher priority; a indispensable element in the art of good living. Certain religious orders encouraged their novices to spend nights in their coffins to contemplate their mortality. The prayers at Compline looked forward to that day when you would lie down and rise, not at the dawn of a new day, but at the dawn of a new Kingdom. Awareness of and preparedness for death was seen as part of living a good life. These days you would be more likely to be accused of being morbid, depressing.

While our culture is not comfortable talking about mortality, it is, simultaneously, saturated with images of death. In computer games, films and television (including news programmes) death is depicted in huge, dramatic and often violent images. Death is OK for public consumption, it seems, if it is in these highly-dramatised forms. Even the news media feels

more like a dramatic presentation rather than real human experience – how else could we eat our supper whilst being told of murderous attacks upon Mumbai hotels? These kinds of images are unlikely to encourage us in thinking more about our own mortality. They are more likely either to make us more afraid, or to engage in unhealthy fantasies about how our own death might be similarly dramatised.

But of course, most of the time, death is not like that. It is not dramatic, violent, horrifying. Most of the time death is very ordinary, quiet and hum-drum. That doesn't mean that it stops being fearful – I was once told by a palliative care consultant to beware of what she described as the 'happy-clappy' element amongst palliative care professionals who want to suggest that death is just a great big adventure – she suspected some over-compensation, and I think she is right. But part of the work of the hospice movement is to de-dramatise death – to take it out of the rather fevered atmosphere of the hospital, and back into something more like a home – indeed many hospices have or are developing ways of offering their services to people who want to die in their own homes, and that is something Helen and Douglas House are doing too.

Death on the big screen does us a big disservice when it comes to being ready, wakeful and watchful for our own deaths. It is simply too dramatic.

But perhaps we, the Church, are equally to blame. For two thousand years, we have been dramatising a death – the death of a man on a Cross – a death re-presented, re-dramatised in each Eucharist. Mel Gibson gave us his own ghastly, no holds barred depiction of the death of Jesus of Nazareth just a few years ago, but centuries of images of the crucifix and some more recent theories of atonement have emphasised the horror of the Cross to make clear the true cost of this transaction for our sins. Never was a death more highly dramatised.

There is, of course, no way of getting around the brutality of crucifixion, but, again, I would argue, we should not over-dramatise the horror of it. Certainly the gospel writers did not feel the need to emphasise the gorier aspects of Christ's death – their accounts are models of restraint. The point, for us here today, is that he died – he died the death we will all face – the death that we all fear to some degree. And what his dying does for us is to show us that God is with us even in our dying. At Christmas we will celebrate the birth of God with us, Emmanuel. At Epiphany he will be given the gift of myrrh – not only God with us, but mortal like us. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the revealing of God irrevocably wedded to us; with us, even in our mortality. God who, in Saint Paul's words, 'will strengthen (us) to the end so that we may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

With the knowledge of such steadfast presence, of God who promises to be there no matter what, and if we can be a little less dramatic about the whole business of mortality, perhaps we can have more confidence and courage to live our lives in readiness, wakeful and watchful for our own deaths. For this need not be morbid. Indeed, to ignore the fact of our mortality is to live in a potentially more dangerous illusion or, at least, evasion – an illusion or evasion that I suspect fuels many a social ill (but that's probably for another sermon). Our mortality can never be a nice thing to contemplate, but it is one of the most important facts about us, and in Christ, our God promises not only to be with us, strengthening us to the end, but that, through Christ, the end will prove to be no end at all.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.