

Sermon Advent 3 Year A 2022

This Advent, for something a little different, we have been considering the traditional focus of this season: the Four Last Things - heaven, hell, death and judgement. We have been exploring them as something of a remedy against the fripperies and frivolities of this silly season. And they help us take seriously what Advent actually points us to: the two comings of Christ - his first at Bethlehem, his second at the end of time. When we commenced this little exploration a couple of weeks ago, I suggested how difficult it is to actually say anything firm and absolute about these 'ultimate realities', these 'end things' because they belong to the realm of mystery, to the eternal. Our language and our images only get us so far. And that is certainly true when we consider heaven, hell and judgement. But for death it's a different matter.

Death does not so much belong to the realm of mystery as to reality. All of us will die. Every human being that has ever lived has died. We all share this in common. It is a universal experience. Still, death is a mysterious experience because it is incredibly personal. We cannot say what it is like to slip from life to death. There is great wisdom, then, in the truth that in the end we all die alone. That the final journey is a solitary (and mysterious) one. And so, we find words to describe this reality difficult. Poets, artists and musicians and philosophers through the ages are all drawn to this experience the prospect of our own finality, and pulled to it with a mix of horror, fear and wonder.

So even if death is a universal human experience it does remain unknown to us. As for heaven, hell and judgment we cannot know for sure what it is like until we are face to face with it. At the same time, we have seen how God wants to communicate something of these mysteries to us. God reveals Godself to us, discloses something to us of these mysteries in ways we can grasp and understand. God does not want us to stumble in darkness or ignorance but seeks to make Godself known to us, and our ultimate destiny known to us. For Christians, we insist the most perfect source of God's self-disclosure/self-revelation is Jesus Christ. And just as Jesus reveals to us a truth we can know and understand about heaven and hell and as we shall see for judgement as well, so too does Jesus reveal to us something about death.

The atheist will say death is the end, the absolute full stop to our existence. They will say the phenomenon of religion in human society arises out of *fear* of death, out of the chilling prospect of nothingness. We need something - religion - to save us from the despair that would otherwise paralyse us. The atheist says the best we can do or hope for is to simply accept the fact of our own ending and nothingness.

But as the stubborn continuance of religious belief shows - even in our modern, scientific world - that this is an idea that leaves most of us cold and looking for a better answer. And Christian faith not only gives us a better answer, it gives us *the* answer! And we can say that with confidence because we look to and believe in One who has come back from the dead, One who reveals that *death is not the final reality*. It means we can take to heart Jesus' words in John's gospel: *I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!*" For sure, death is a great tribulation. It is unsettling and can get messy. For those witnessing it, it can be distressing. For those experiencing it, in our culture and context, it will mostly occur as our bodies gradually and slowly stop working. This can be frustrating and stressful and comes with a sense of loss. We can no longer do what we once did. That is part of the journey. Part of the tribulation. *But it belongs to this world*. Death belongs to this world. But Jesus says, *take courage: I have overcome the world*.

The Christian is not left stumbling towards a fearful end. We can look at death with hope, with confidence, with joy even. We can do this by looking at Jesus' own experience of death. And as terrible and awful and bloody as it was, as Christians we know his death was not the end. It simply opened for him a new beginning. And as the New Testament writers so emphatically declare, a new beginning for us as well. As St Paul says, *death where is your victory, grave where is your sting?* Paul expressing his absolute confidence that the Resurrection changes everything for us. Everything. Death simply opening up to us the joyful reality of life in God's eternal presence.

One of the catch cries in our Advent liturgies is 'watch', and 'wait'. It's for this reason Advent is so fitting to consider death - and especially our own death. Like many priests, I have the privilege of 'waiting' with people in our care and their

families when a loved one is dying. Saying prayers or listening to stories from their lives as we 'wait' for Death to come to their loved one. But waiting is often a hard and uncomfortable place to be. It challenges our sense that we have to be 'active' to be achieving any good. Sometimes, and more often than we think, 'waiting' is the appropriate disposition that we should hold.

But what we might call 'godly waiting' is so incredibly important to dying well. It is one of the blessings of old age that we can let go of previous cares, worries and preoccupations of life and turn our hearts and minds at last to God. As the body weakens and we can no longer be as busy and as active as we once were, we have time to pray. We have time to look toward the Lord, to *wait for him*, which is at the heart of *all* prayer. *All* prayer is essentially turning and waiting for the Lord. So do not fight or resist the opportunities of old age. See it as the *particular gift* of the final years of life. And for those who are younger must come to realise that this waits for them too, and that their busyness and activity *is not* what will their lives ultimate meaning.

And I would hope that all of you would each of you appreciate the prayer and ministrations of the priest when your time comes. So, tell your family and loved ones: *make sure you call the priest!* The sacraments God has given his church are not simply empty rituals or vain mutterings. The sacraments *are effective* and I assure you the prayers and sacraments offered when a person is dying are effective: *they help to make a good and holy death.* We are in a better position than most to experience a good and happy death. Most of our culture now thinks this is not possible. We live in a culture terrified by death. The elements of waiting and of mystery too confronting. A good death is now regarded as one we merely have control over. The wide acceptance of the grave moral of euthanasia now shows this. Let us be clear. No faithful Christian seeking to live by hope can have any part in this grave moral evil. But Christians can look at death naturally and as a matter of fact because the fear has been taken out for us. We look at death with hope. Of course, there is sadness. Of course, it is difficult. But we know that it is not the end; that in Christ Jesus death becomes our movement from one state of life to another more glorious and beautiful state of life. Our living, even in our dying, is in that sure and certain hope. Amen.