

Sermon All Souls 2023

The saying goes, there are two certainties in life: death and taxes. It will not surprise anyone here tonight that I do not ascend this pulpit to address you on the subject of tax! It would be fair to say, however, that both carry with them a prospect of dread. And that both would ideally be avoided if at all possible. Unfortunately, unless you are a multi-billion-dollar company, tax will come to us all. As will death.

Still, human beings have a great capacity to avoid the inevitable. In developed Western countries such as ours, death is mostly hidden from view. Most people now die in hospitals or other institutions, despite surveys indicating something like 80% of people would prefer to die in their own homes. One of the reasons why the scenes on the daily news these past weeks so shock and unsettle us is that death – especially violent death – is so utterly removed from the experience of most of us. In ages past it was common. Thomas Hobbes described life in the Middle Ages as ‘nasty, brutish and short.’ But that description could apply to most of humankind for most of its history.

But for us, with death now mostly delayed until old age, out of sight, and removed from our common experience, death has become not only something to dread, but also a thing of terror and fear. It is strange and unknown. Polite society will not talk about it. And when it does appear it is either sanitised or presented to us as something ghoulish and macabre. These approaches, then, can make death something too terrible to contemplate. They make it a burden too great to bear.

But this ought not to be the case for the Christian. As people trusting in the Lord Christ and in his *victory over death*, death is neither fearful nor terrifying. It is not a cause of dread or horror. Our Lord’s words in the gospel today can speak to our experience of death, and as such are both comfort and assurance: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.* These words can be spoken into our experience of death because in Christ the power – indeed, the burden - of death has been lifted.

Christian hope in the face of death does not come from wishful thinking. It is not fantasy or delusion. It is not a psychological coping mechanism invented to help us the prospect of our annihilation. Christian hope in the face of death comes from an experience. It is an experience that shows us that death is not the end.

The resounding witness of the New Testament points us to the One who experienced death – indeed death in the most shocking, violent and excruciating way – but whose triumphant resurrection shows us this is not the end! Now, Christ’s resurrection is not an end in itself. It is precisely so that death will no longer have ultimate power over us as well. And because we can look past death to something else that the burden of death is lifted.

Christian hope, Christian faith, means we can look past the burden of our mortal flesh, past the burden of our mortality, past the burden of grief. What God has shown us in Christ reframes all of these. Which is not to deny the truth of our burdens. We know the pain of grief. We know how our bodies fail and falter, and how, especially with age, they become weak, and no longer cooperate as we might wish. We know the prospect of our death and demise. In short, the burdens are real. They are heavy for us. *But they do not have the last word.*

And this means we can look forward in hope, not away in dread. It means we can look at death – the death of our loved ones, and our death – not as if toward emptiness and nothingness, but toward a place of light, happiness, and peace! It means we do not farewell our loved ones into an eternal darkness. We commit them to the mercy and care of God! It means we do not have to sanitise death. We can approach it as the right and natural end of our journey. We do not have to avoid the prospect of our death. We can approach it calmly, and peacefully. Christian hope means that one of the chief goals of the Christian life is to prepare for a happy death! A happy death! Who else talks like that? Who else can?! Except those convinced of the hope of resurrection!

Our ceremonies at the end of mass tonight might strike some as strange, morose, or morbid even. But on the contrary. Our gathering around the catafalque, our prayers there, our reverencing with water and incense speak to a profound reality. It says that we – as Christians - can look at death *face on*. It means we can say with Saint Paul, *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?* It means that whatever burden we experience in death – the burden of our grief, our loss, our own sense of frailty, the burden of our own mortality – that burden is lifted! And if we allow Christ to take the burden from us, then indeed we will find rest for our souls. Amen.