

*Living is Christ*

'Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.' Thus spoke the great 18<sup>th</sup> century English writer and wit, Samuel Johnson, and although the likely method of execution would not be hanging, that quote might apply to St Paul as he writes a letter to a church which he had founded in a place called Philippi, and from which we have read this morning.

The letter to the Philippians is one of what we call Paul's prison letters, for as he writes he is incarcerated, quite possibly in the city of Ephesus, for his preaching of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In an empire where Caesar was proclaimed as Lord, and where Caesar's conquests were spoken of as good news, Gospel, you could get into trouble for proclaiming that Jesus the crucified criminal was the true Lord and that his victory over sin and death were the real good news. And Paul writes from this prison to a church which rates highly in his affections: he had founded the church at Philippi and they had been generous to him. In those days when you languished in prison you had to rely on the generosity of others for survival and the Philippians had evidently raised money and sent it to Paul and the letter he writes to them now from his cell is partly one of gratitude.

As Paul writes, though, it is clear that the very real threat hangs over him that his imprisonment might lead to his execution for the cause of the Gospel. And for that reason we might expect Paul's mind to be wonderfully concentrated, as Samuel Johnson suggested. Imagine how you would feel in that situation - alone, in a prison cell, with the sword of execution hanging over you: indeed quite possibly someone in our church might have been in that very situation, such is our diverse congregation and our troubled world. Would your mind be 'wonderfully concentrated' as you faced the prospect of death?

Like it or not, the subject of death encounters us as we look at this passage. We can't really avoid it from what Paul writes here - and this is perhaps a good opportunity to take on this topic. Without wanting to scare-monger, we are living through a time when death is potentially that bit closer to us. The scary thing about Covid-19 is that you can have it asymptotically and therefore entirely safely and unnoticed - or it can kill you: especially if, like some of us, you are technically in the vulnerable category. So this passage from Philippians might be an invitation to discuss death.

It's a topic we tend to avoid and you're considered morbid if you address it. It's something of a taboo subject, in fact I suspect that most of us are to some extent in denial about our death. We think that somehow we will get out of here alive, or, as Woody Allen put it, we don't mind dying - we just don't want to be there when it happens. But as a minister who has to take funerals from time to time, I would suggest that there are four possible attitudes to death that we might encounter. The first is what you might call the Stoical approach, which is to accept death calmly as a fact of life. In other words don't fight it, don't be troubled by it: death is simply a feature of life that must be accepted placidly. For those in the ancient world who followed the philosophical school of Stoicism this attitude toward death reflected back on the way they lived - the awareness of death's inevitability encouraged them to live worthy and meaningful lives, to live each day as if it could be their last. Well, I don't think that aspect of Stoicism is so prevalent today: people tend not to allow the prospect of death to impact their lives at all - they prefer to banish it from their minds as far as possible. Following that, however, there is a second attitude to death, one that is expressed in a famous passage written by a clergyman and professor named Henry Scott Holland and often quoted at funerals and which begins, 'Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was ...' This is death as a simple transition from one state to another. And that is very comforting, but does it not rather tame death, and belittle it, and deny its pain and tragedy? But then, by contrast, there is a third reaction to death: not of calm acceptance, but of resistance and anger. Perhaps the most famous recent expression of this is the poem by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, written for his dying father, 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. It includes the line, 'rage, rage against the

dying of the light.’ This is death as an enemy to be resisted, to be cursed – but we have to ask if that is really the best way to die, raging at the dying of the light. Is it not possible to make peace with death? And that takes us to a fourth possible attitude, one that treats death as one more obstacle that humanity in its triumph will overcome. So there are high-tech companies, like Calico in Silicon Valley which views ageing as a disease to be cured, leading ultimately to the eradication of death itself. So Calico speaks of ‘solving death’: what a fascinating insight that gives us into the technological mindset, where all life’s challenges become problems to be solved.

So what is Paul’s attitude to death in this passage? Well, what strikes us is that Paul here regards it almost with indifference, such that he can say that he really cannot choose between life and death: he says, ‘... I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two...’, And he goes on to reveal that really he would prefer to die, but it may be that God still has work for him to do here.

Well, we could delve into Paul’s theology of death and resurrection. We could consider the fact that Paul believed that when we die we go into an in-between state, awaiting the last day and resurrection. And we could consider Paul’s understanding of judgement, and, most importantly, we could emphasise that Paul considered that in fact he had already died. He had died in his baptism: that was his real death. As the Scottish theologian George MacLeod put it, for us as Christians, for the baptised, ‘the undertakers have already been for us’. Without going into all that, however, what we see here in this passage from Philippians is that actually Paul’s focus is not on death at all. He has little to say about it. For him, the entire focus is on Christ. And he puts this very strongly. He says in verse 21, ‘for me living is Christ, and dying is gain’. For him ‘living is Christ’, in other words for him real living means being united with Christ, being one with Christ, and that begins here and now and it only becomes more intense and more glorious and more fulfilled in death. Now, note what Paul is doing here: he is shifting the focus: not on life, not on death – but on Christ.

Let’s consider that phrase, ‘Living is Christ’, a bit more deeply. What are we to make of this? Well, perhaps we could think of it this way. When we consider our lives we recognise that they are very complex. We are faced continually with decisions and choices – it’s like walking into a forest with an array of paths before us. And as well as the choices we make there are the things that happen to us, unplanned: events that overtake us, experiences that mould and shape us, things beyond our control. So there is a random quality to life, and especially in a time like this, in a pandemic, we feel very vulnerable and out of control of our lives. And inwardly we human beings are complex too: we are a mass of conflicting emotions and desires, joys and regrets, hopes and fears, consistencies and contradictions. Our lives can often seem like a mass of loose ends, disparate and somewhat chaotic. And the question faces us, is there something that can gather up all these loose ends, something that can make some sort of coherence out of them? Is there something that we can hold onto, by which everything falls into place? I’m reminded of the title of a book by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard: ‘Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing.’ In a way Kierkegaard’s intention was to simplify life, to try to boil it all down to one thing which would be the clue to everything. Well, for Paul, it is Christ. For Paul, living is Christ. It is knowing Christ, following Christ, holding onto and being held onto by Christ. Christ is the key whereby everything, the flux and flow of existence, is reconfigured into a meaningful life. As Jesus said, ‘See first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you’: seek first Christ, and everything else falls into place.

Beware, however! Beware of a misunderstanding. ‘Living is Christ’ does not turn us into religious zombies. It does not mean that all we talk about is Christ, or the Bible, or religion. Christ is the one who came and lived a fully human life – who lived and laughed and engaged his body and his mind and his senses and resisted everything that harmed life – including, at times, religion. And he offers us not life in a religious ghetto – but life in all its fullness.

So of course we all long for a full life. We all want to live well. But what we learn from the Bible is that when we aim for life, when we target life and strive to gain it, we end up losing it. And likewise when we become pre-occupied with death it overshadows and blights us and life is

diminished. Paul's focus is on neither. It is on Christ – and then life, and death, take care of themselves.

To return to where we began. Samuel Johnston observed that when someone knows they are to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates their mind wonderfully. Well, Paul's mind was concentrated, but not on his possible immanent execution. His mind, and not only his mind but his whole life, was concentrated elsewhere, on Christ - such that he could say, defiantly, 'for me, living is Christ and dying is gain.' Amen.

Almighty and holy God,  
 eternal and gracious Maker,  
 we praise and worship you,  
 sovereign God, forever One, forever three,  
 eternal in love and joy.  
 You are far above and beyond us –  
 you have no need of us.  
 You are complete in yourself,  
 an eternal communion of love,  
 forever free and unbound.  
 And yet you have come to us in Jesus Christ,  
 reaching out to us and becoming one with us,  
 forever bound to us in love...  
 And we confess that we are bound,  
 imprisoned, a world in captivity to things that destroy.  
 We confess that we are turned in on ourselves  
 instead of outward to you and our neighbour;  
 We confess that bound by our past,  
 ensnared by wrongs done and wrongs done to us.  
 And we pray for release.  
 We pray for forgiveness.  
 We pray for your spirit of freedom who can  
 undo the chains that bind and liberate.  
 Come Holy Spirit we pray and lead us into the life of Christ.  
 For we pray in his name, and in the words he taught us,  
 saying together...