

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH DEATH 2: Acts 25:11

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Luke 24: 33-48.

We saw last time, that the expression 'learning to live with the virus' can actually be taken further to cover the more general thought of 'learning to live with death.' We saw that the apostle Paul, when faced with the possibility of death, did not protest. He showed this when he was before the Roman Governor, Festus, answering accusations that were being made against him by the Jewish leaders. Even though, were he to be put to death, it would be an injustice, he is not afraid to die if he is proved to be 'guilty'. Likewise, when going to Jerusalem, and facing arrest, he was not deterred from going but declared that he was ready to die, if needs be, for the Lord's sake. We saw that this attitude towards death comes through in some of Paul's epistles and also in one of Peter's epistles. These examples ask the question of us about how comfortable we are with 'learning to living with death'.

1. Secular culture does not 'do death'.

Secular thinking does not have a place for God or supernatural realities and powers. It says that such thinking should not intrude into public policy making or influence legislation or anything that is done by the state. The National Secular Society in the UK is against, for example, Bishops sitting in the House of Lords, or creationism being taught in schools as part of the science curriculum, or prayers in Parliament and in local council meetings.

This thinking is very strong among those who are in Government, in the civil service, in broadcasting, in academia and, likely as not, among many in the medical profession. This thinking has no place for the afterlife but believes that this is the only life we have and therefore it must be protected, preserved, and extended because there is nothing else. To lose life, or to cause others to lose it, is the worst thing imaginable because with death, all is lost, in this thinking. How different to the words of one of the figures in the early church, who said he feared sin more than death.

2. It is normal Christian life to live with death.

Most religions deal with the subject of death. They have a belief in the afterlife. These religions, with the exception of true Christianity, believe that our works in this life determine what will happen to us in the next life. The Christian faith is able to answer

the question of death because it is the only religion where the central figure came back to life from the grave. Christ's resurrection, following His death on the cross, marks out the Christian faith as utterly unique. We can read the record of this incredible event in Luke 24:36-43. It is, of course, reported in all the gospel accounts. In 2 Timothy 4:6-8 we see how the Lord Jesus, by His resurrection, abolished death. He has defeated death and now gone ahead of us to glory, which is the final home of the believer when we follow Him to be there.

Secular culture has lost this hope. It does not have it in its own account of life and where we are going. Somewhere in its soul, secular culture has fear and is in bondage to, especially, fear of death (Hebrews 4:12-13). A culture that has fear at its heart is a culture that is poorly prepared to deal with pandemics or any other threat to life. Such a culture will also be liable to irrationality, folly and bad reasoning, as fear is an enemy of clear thinking.

As Christians, we have to ask ourselves, 'Are we in bondage to fear of death?' Do we think clearly about death? For so much of our teaching is about death and the afterlife. It is about faith in the unseen world above, of glory, or heaven and hell. We have an answer to death, and we have the resources, in the here and now, to be able to live with death and the thought of it. The result should be that we have assurance and calm, that we not in the grip of fear or doubt. For Paul, this knowledge instilled boldness and courage into him and he speaks to us in that vein (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

3. Has the church lost her way?

We have to ask ourselves further, though, whether the wider evangelical church has lost her way, in some respects, and has been caught up too much in the expectations of a largely secular culture. Has our readiness for death and glory been dulled by expectations that are too bound to this world and to this life? Have we promised ourselves too much from this life or been promised too much by others?

For past generations, death was somehow more obvious and witnessed more often. People died earlier and the experience of other people dying was experienced earlier in most people's lives. Infant mortality was much higher. Babies would often die in childbirth as would the mother too. Children dying was a much more frequent experience for families. There was less knowledge about public health, disease transmission and there were fewer treatments and medications. People died of things that today are treatable. War was perhaps a more frequent experience and men would die in combat. Occupations were more hazardous and there were fewer health and safety regulations.

Christians were often at the forefront of bringing needed reform in many areas of public life and public health. Advances in science have meant that people now live much

longer. Yet even with all this progress, these advances and changes for the better are only a temporary solution and cannot postpone death indefinitely.

Today, people expect to live longer. And, by and large, compared to earlier generations, people today do live longer. People today expect, by and large, to be able to retire and to live into old age and to have a good quality of life in old age. Things that we do are safer than they used to be and getting safer over time as every major incident leads to further laws and regulations to ensure these things never happen again.

But it can all have an unhelpful side effect. We forget how to live with death. We can be lulled into a false sense of security that everything has a cure and a solution. It can become an expectation that health problems have an answer. People can even, in this way of thinking, take it further and feel they are owed or entitled to a good quality old age. Putting it in these terms, it becomes almost an idea that death simply shouldn't happen and that there must have been something that could have been done to prevent it. Taking this further still, it means that if people die, someone is to blame if loved ones or friends do not manage to make it further and have a longer life.

Governments in advanced economies get saddled with expectations that they should be able to solve every problem. In responding to this, Governments and political parties make promises that they may well not be able to fulfill but feel compelled to make them by the prevailing expectations in society. And in a secular society with no hope for eternity, this can become the all-important thing because people have nothing other than this life.

So as Christians, we have to ask ourselves whether we are also expecting too much from this world, from this life, from Governments and scientists. Do we expect too much of the medical profession, that they will be able to patch us up and keep us going to some target age, say, 90? Do we expect the medical profession to be able to sustain our loved ones indefinitely? Are we out of the habit of living with death and have we forgotten what it means to live with the thought of our own and other people's mortality constantly before us? There used to put more urgency into the preaching of earlier generations. What we would call 'premature death' was to be expected and prepared for. It is to be feared that we are not as well prepared as past generations were to deal more satisfactorily with death in our everyday lives and that we risk losing our sense of mortality and, with it, the hope of glory to come.