

Today I am going to talk to you about death. [insert pause to allow an unseemly rush for the door!] Being given this subject to preach on could either be described as:

- a fitting punishment for missing the staff meeting, or
- one of the preaching year's best short straws, or
- a brilliant opportunity for me to open up and conquer one of the last taboo subjects in our society today.

I suspect the former! Anyway, what I am planning is a sermon that morphs seamlessly from death to hope. From here to eternity (hey that would be a great title for a film).

Unusually for this service our younger children are doing a separate activity during my talk. While it's important for children to be aware of death, I am not sure they want to hear me drone on. Actually, in my experience, Children tend to surprise us with the maturity with which they approach death, but their perspective is entirely different and it's better that they work through this subject in their own way. So they're going to be in the chancel with Lesley and hearing a story and explore what remembrance means to them. If families want to come together again for communion that's fine and there'll be the opportunity for kids to come back if they want to - if they want to stay where they are that's fine too. So expect lots and lots of traffic movement during the service.

So what does remembrance mean to us? This is an appropriate time to look at this subject. Tomorrow is All Souls' day - when those who have lost loved ones mark another year of separation and give thanks for the lives of those who have gone before us. Then next week comes Remembrance Sunday, when we of course pay our respects to those who died protecting this country in wartime. At St Andrews we are also starting a series of talks that point us towards an event called Grave Talk which we are holding later on in November - details in the pew sheets - but in short it's an event that allows us the space and time to talk realistically about death and dying in a way that is very difficult to do normally. And there'll be cakes aplenty.....

And I want to say at the outset that I am fully aware that the subject of death and grieving is a very raw one for some of us. Most of us of any vintage have experienced the loss of someone we love, and I know some of us have lost loved ones very recently, and we who are grieving remember what those early days and weeks are like. It's important that nobody here feels that I am riding roughshod over what they are experiencing....grief is horrible. I know. Quite apart from my personal experiences, as a minister I have more opportunities than most see the pain that grief causes, the deep shock...the bewilderment. So I want those of you who

are grieving to feel surrounded by our love and care today as we unpick this difficult subject.

So where do we start with this. How about with this famous quotation from Benjamin Franklin: "In this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes". The bad news is ladies and gentleman that I can say with some certainty that every single one of us is going to die sometime. Yes, I know that Lazarus gets something of a lucky break in the immediate aftermath of today's Gospel reading, but the truth is it's going to happen to all of us at some stage - hopefully a long time hence, but it will happen - and it's worth pointing out that Lazarus himself having been raised from the dead by Jesus, died again eventually in his own good time.

And we as a society are quite unusual in the lengths we go to to not talk about death, not think about it, certainly not plan for it. It literally makes us shudder to think about it, as if talking about it will accelerate the process in some way. And it has to be said that us buttoned-up Brits (including me by the way) are the world champions at not talking about death. This is probably a reaction to the excesses of the Victorian era in the UK where the whole of society swung too far in the other direction - death appears to have become an obsession for whole swathes of the country - a time when black was to be worn for two years after the death of a spouse and even your door knocker was to be swathed in black crepe. But

the result of this understandable swing away from the excessive, unpleasant excesses of the Victorians, followed by the horrors of the two World Wars, is that we have taken our death avoidance to such an extreme that the whole process has become sanitised and we've managed to detach ourselves from a fact of life which is as natural as our birth and our existence in this world.

Today I am going to talk a little bit about why I believe this is, and to try and align ourselves to Jesus' teaching on death - to encourage us and give us hope for the future.

So why do we recoil from death? Well it's all down to one thing of course. Fear. Horrible, understandable, entrenched, fear. Most of us (including me) are fearful of our own death, and even more fearful at the prospect of the death of someone we love. I can't make light of this. It's true. Even those of us who believe the gospel, and believe that there is life after death, and that heaven awaits us remain morbidly terrified of the process of getting there. It's not the destination I fear - actually I am really looking forward to getting to heaven and seeing what it's like.... it's the journey to get there that frightens and upsets me (a bit like Ryanair) and the thought of leaving those I love behind to grieve without me.

And the unusual thing about the fear of death and dying is that, in most people, unlike most other fears it seems

to get worse as we get older. I don't know many twenty-somethings who are focussing on their own mortality - they tend to be focussing on cramming as much into their lives as possible don't they. It's as we hit middle age (I'm told!) that suddenly this cloud develops - usually triggered by our own first significant loss, perhaps by our first health scare or witnessing a friend of loved-one dealing with serious illness. And the point is that Christian people are not immune to this cloud.

Jesus knew this. He knew that fear of death is a primordial instinct, programmed into us from the dawn of time. It's interesting isn't it when Jesus gives those great affirming, encouraging words we heard in the gospel today: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." he follows it by an almost unnoticed question to Martha: "Do you believe this?" - it's not a question Jesus asks normally when he gives his disciples and his followers a glimpse of who he is and the power that he holds. "Do you believe this?" And in asking this question, Jesus is really saying - "Do you Martha believe this is possible?" And he is recognising that on a personal level this is a really difficult thing for us cynical, world-weary, creatures to grasp.

And that's the question I've been forced to confront as I have been preparing this talk. (to reassure those of you

who are wondering if I have actually prepared this talk!) Do I believe this is possible? That those who believe in Jesus will never die. It's a biggie isn't it? And it gets to the heart of our faith. It is the main thing that differentiates me as a Christian from the rest of the world - whereas I (on my better days) have certainty my non-believing fellow men and women are confronted by what Rabelais called "le grand peut-etre" - the great perhaps. I find it quite reassuring that Jesus recognised that Martha may have been doubtful - even when she was confronted by Jesus himself in the flesh. How much more difficult is it for us to take that giant leap and start believing in twenty-first Century Chesterton?

But the point is, we have to believe it, or at least to begin to move towards believing it and we have to continue to remind ourselves of the truth of it if we are to begin to conquer the fear that besets us all and take away the sting of death ... let me say it again....you and I will never die because God sent his only son to earth to conquer death once and for all on our behalf. Isaiah anticipated this in the reading we heard from him today: "he will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces" Isaiah says....."so let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation". It couldn't be plainer could it? Death is not the end. Yes, It's the end of our life on earth of course, but it isn't the end of our life. "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" says the robber on the cross next to Jesus,

And Jesus' reply says it all: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

And if we can even begin to take this promise on board, that you and I shall be with Jesus in paradise our view of our own death changes. And also our ability to grieve for those we have lost changes radically too. The agony of separation has to be diminished if we know not only that our loved ones haven't just evaporated into thin air, but better than this they have gone to a place that is paradise.... a heaven that is not just some nebulous floaty place where orbs of spirit-ness and light hover in raptured loveliness but a place where, according to our Isaiah reading this morning, good food and fine claret abounds which will have come as something of a relief to my dear departed father! It's a real place. With wine, and food and laughter and people.

And the scripture is absolutely plain that the one prerequisite to get into heaven is that we believe that Jesus is who he says he is - the Son of God. The idea of St Peter at the pearly gates holding the book of our lives and deciding who is coming in - like a heavenly bouncer from Eastenders - do not reflect the truth of Jesus' words in the Gospel - "those who believe in me shall have eternal life."

That's huge isn't it? And I would suggest for most of us it's too much to take in - too much to comprehend. I love the reaction of the father of the demon possessed

boy in Mark's gospel: "I believe, help me with my unbelief" he says when confronted by the miracle that is Jesus Christ and his ability to turn lives around and heal his son. That strikes me as an extremely realistic and honest and human reaction. That's the paradox in all of us - "I believe" (ish) - probably not as much as I'd like to or as much as I feel I should.... "help me with my unbelief". That's what I need - I need help to get my mind around this.

And I think that help comes from two places....

- first from the bible - I know I need to keep ploughing into the Gospel because it is there that the promise of eternal life is repeated again and again and hopefully the more I read it the more it will stick. It is the promises in the bible that will help me stop myself from allowing fear of death to take over
- And second, is through prayer - this is too big a thing to comprehend on our own and just as the man in Mark's gospel asks God to help him with his unbelief I need to ask God, in prayer to do the same.

At every Eucharist we have people on hand who would be delighted to pray with you for a breakthrough on this - can I encourage you to make use of them? You might just see me queuing in line!

And let me leave you if I may with a less well-known quote from Benjamin Franklin that sums it up rather

neatly. "Fear not death for the sooner we die, the longer we shall be immortal."

Amen.