

Be praised, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.

Blessed are those whom she will find in your most holy will.

Some of you may recognise those words as part of the *Canticle of Brother Sun* attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, not least because you will have sung a version of them in a hymn which I could not ask for us to sing this evening, containing as it does the word we are not allowed to use until Easter: *All creatures of our God and King*.

In many modern hymnals, the relevant verse is left out, for just as calling Jesus our lover is considered inappropriate by some editors, so reference to death as a welcome event is not thought to be quite what our 21st century society wants to hear, so – unless those who arrange the buying of the hymn-books are very careful – we may not get to sing the lovely verse:

And thou, most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our latest breath – O praise him!
Thou ledest home the child of God,
and Christ our Lord the way hath trod – O praise him!

I think it was the summer of 1980 when I first found myself in the presence of someone dying. I managed to get a place to work with the chaplain at Saint Mary's Hospice in Birmingham. It was at the time almost brand-new and only the seventh independent hospice in the country: hospice care was still seen as something revolutionary.

Kam was my first introduction to the delights of motor-neurone disease (I had never heard of it before), and he died while I was there. While the reason for my being there was first and foremost to learn how to give spiritual support to the dying, the real education for me was in having to face death and come to terms with its inevitability. (Taxes – the other inevitable thing in life – were something I had to learn about much later in life!)

Even at that time, there were concerns about how people in Britain dealt with death. One of the most revered writers of the hospice movement, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, signposted the sanitised so-called Rest Homes of the USA as an unhealthy development which we in Britain would probably copy in due course.

The contrast over the span of just a few generations is in fact enormous. Where healthcare was poor, especially for those who could not pay for better, death was a more obviously frequent occurrence than it is today. I find myself agreeing with the view that previous arrangements where local women would wash and lay out bodies in the place of death, and then a carpenter would construct a coffin around the body, which would stay there until the day of the funeral, attended often by at least one grieving (usually female) relative all in black – all followed by the inevitable comedy of trying to get the thing down the stairs (or if not, out of the window) so that it could be taken to the funeral – all these things seem to me to be healthy – not easy, but healthy.

This is certainly true for the West Indian funerals we have had the privilege of hosting in this church, where coffins are open and people file past to pay their last respects, only a very short time later to be taking their turn in backfilling the grave or strewing it with flowers – these things acknowledge the realities of life and death and grief, and enable people to move on.

I have serious concerns about sanitised 'celebrations of life' which seldom address the real issues, preferring instead to imply that everyone was a 'lovely person', and I do wonder what future issues people are storing up for themselves when they have a direct cremation which no one attends, because the remedy for grief has to involve travelling through the journey of death with the one who has died, and yes, with the messy as well as the lovely parts of their lives.

When I chose the topic 'Matters of Life and Death' for these addresses, it had something to do, I suspect, with the recent loss – not exclusively through death – of some valued members of the congregation of this church. I have had plenty of time to regret publishing such a topic so far in advance, yet the only thing I would change is the order of things. For it is Holy Week, and for Jesus it was not a matter of living life and ending it with death; it was a matter of living through death and ending it with life.

Reading John's Gospel aloud in its entirety last Wednesday brought home how significant the understanding of death was in the teaching of Jesus, and that for all the promise of new life, death had to be faced first before new life could begin. There are echoes of this in the other three gospel accounts when they describe how hard his disciples found it to grasp that Jesus must suffer and die before he could accomplish the new life he had been sent to bring.

Together with this John frequently refers to the belief in the resurrection. It's worth recalling that the idea of the resurrection was in fact relatively new in the Hebrew understanding of the things of death. Pharisees and Sadducees were still at each other's throats about this during the ministry of Saint Paul. Many of Jesus's hearers would have written him off because he spoke so often about the resurrection, and it is significant that so many come to faith following the raising of Lazarus, which we heard about in last Sunday's Mass, not because of the miracle, but because they gain a small insight into the reality of resurrection.

From Kam to the many others I have in forty or so years accompanied through the process of death, my experience has been always that it is anything other than a full stop to life. Yes – there is something awesomely and frighteningly final about the ceasing to be of the co-operative and complex system that is the human body, yet there is something in this process that makes it for me like a journey where the unavoidable fact of bodily death is a waymark, a step along the way.

What John's gospel provides for us is so clearly a continuous journey. From the very start Jesus proceeds through his earthly ministry and he does so in a very earthly way. His life can be shared – and it is, by those who accept the repeated invitation 'Come and see'; his life brings new life to others *in this world*; and when that bodily life is extinguished, he gives up his spirit, while his body is seen to pour forth water and blood, which he has already taught us are to be for us the principles of divine life.

The only break in his life caused by his death and burial – again according to John's Gospel – is one of perception. While his friends do for his body the usual honours, binding it with fragrant spices, they cannot perceive that this body isn't actually done for. It takes the appearances to Mary and in the Upper Room before they can really grasp that he is alive *in the body*. In his teaching Jesus consistently weaves the themes of resurrection, new life, and being born again into the realities of earthly life, so that the seemingly disastrous event of his bodily death may be seen in

hindsight to be but a stage in the journey that is life in God. That life is shared in the water and the blood – in baptism and holy communion – and travelling with him – the Way and the Truth and the Life – even death cannot serve as a final defeat for the child of God.

To take death seriously, then, is a key to understanding and also to participating in the new life to which Jesus invites us: not *beyond* death but *through* death. It is a dynamic reality which forms an inevitable part of the story of everyone's life, and this would explain why I have never sat at a death bed and felt that here was a life coming to an end, even though that language might seem to fit. I have always felt that here is something slipping away into a reality which I cannot now experience or share.

In the final discourses of John's Gospel, Jesus makes a lot of wordplay over going away and coming back again, almost like a 'now you see me, now you don't' game – *in a little while you will no longer see me, and then in a little while you will see me*. It is one of the many sections of his teaching that end up thoroughly confusing his disciples, and I can assure you that reading it aloud after 11 at night, which I'll be doing as every year to close the Watching this coming Thursday, it can get both tongue and brain completely tied up if you do not concentrate hard.

Yet he is very clear to them that *where [he] is going, [they] cannot come* at least for the time being. It is – like the Word, the Light, the Life to which John bears testimony – something that goes beyond human understanding. And I have to say that I am happy with this.

Recently I came across a book that was on offer and was tempted to buy it. It's by Professor Brian Cox and another less famous professor, and it's entitled 'Black Holes'. The discount was significant and attractive, but I did not buy it because I was put off by the sub-title 'The Key to Understanding the Universe'. I would have thought that following the work of such as Einstein and Schroedinger and so many others in the twentieth century, people might have grown out of expecting a complete understanding of everything, and come to realise that somethings are simply mind-blowing, astounding and cannot fully be summed up or explained in any human language whether that be the spoken word or the secrets of mathematical formulae.

I would not like you to think that this evening in such a short time I had imagined I could sum up and understand one of the ultimate mysteries of human existence, that of the meaning of death, but I have shared some of the insights I discover in the gospels, especially that of John, and also some of my own experience. You will have your own experiences and insights to add to these, of course, and between us all no doubt we'll still be waiting when it comes to the event of our own death. Like the disciples with the risen Jesus, maybe we'll then have the benefit of hindsight to help us grasp the reality – and if his promise is true, we will also have the light of his presence to cast upon it.

So I want to end this evening not with further thinking, but with a story and a prayer. The story is of Saint Francis receiving what we today would call a terminal diagnosis from his doctor – it's taken from the *Mirror of Perfection* – and the prayer is by one of the great Franciscan theologians and spiritual writers Eric Doyle, whose name will appear again as we travel through these Holy Week Addresses.

The doctor said to him, 'Brother, God willing, all will be well with you.' Again Blessed Francis said to him, 'Tell me the truth. What is your real opinion? Don't be afraid to tell me, for by God's grace I am not such a

coward as to fear death. By the grace and help of the Holy Spirit I am so united to my Lord that I am equally content to die or to live.'

Then the doctor told him frankly, 'Father, according to our medical knowledge your disease is incurable, and it is my belief that you will die either at the end of September or in early October.' Then Blessed Francis, lying on his bed, most reverently and devoutly stretched out his hands to God, and with great joy of mind and body said, 'Welcome, Sister Death.'

*Lord of my origin
Draw me closer to you.*

*Lord of my existence
Direct all my ways.*

*Lord of my calling
Give me strength to go on.*

*Lord of my faith
Preserve me from doubt.*

*Lord of my hope
Keep me from despair.*

*Lord of my love
Let me never grow cold.*

*Lord of my past
May I never forget you.*

*Lord of my present
Be near me always.*

*Lord of my future
Keep me faithful to the end.*

*Lord of my life
Let me live in your presence.*

*Lord of my death
receive me at last.*

*Lord of my eternity
Bless me for ever. Amen.*

PC, 2nd April 2023