

Having set myself up for this Holy Week to talk about two of the most difficult topics imaginable: Death and Life, it occurred to me that I should not avoid the most difficult aspect of all – what actually is *quality of life*. Let me set the scene by offering a simple summary of what I have said over the past two days.

I considered the meaning of death and its significance in the mystery of human life as acted out in the death of Jesus on the cross. For this I leant principally on John's Gospel and some of the teaching of Saint Francis, interpreted by the Franciscan theologian and spiritual writer Eric Doyle.

I then considered life as being basically meaningless if not lived in relationship with others, with creation and with God who has given us both as a gift. I leant in some wise again on John's Gospel and on the teaching of Saint Francis, though behind some of the thinking was the writing of late twentieth-century theologians of the Trinity, and for creation I drew on the teaching of Pope Francis in *Laudato sii*.

The question of quality of life will not so easily be drawn from reading I have already done either years ago as part of my education and training, or more recently in an attempt to keep myself up-to-date. We all know what the burning issues are that involve quality of life: euthanasia and assisted suicide; the abortion of babies who have been diagnosed in the womb with various types of disease or handicap; issues of acceptable levels for minimum wage, compulsory education, availability of free or subsidised education – and those are just for starters. When it comes to human beings, these issues do not seem as simple as they might appear, say, for domestic animals that are suffering or have no evident joy out of life, or are judged to have no viable future.

So I want to start in what might seem at first an obvious and then a strange place – the Book of Genesis. In the second creation account we are presented with a place where the first man and woman are able to find life and meaning in communion with God. It is depicted as an idyllic garden, where God himself goes walking in the cool of the evening – a place where all relationships are honest and open and healthy. It is only when the pair give in to their desire to have control over everything that they end up being cast out of the garden, and the curse that goes with them severely compromises their quality of life by indicating that the important things in their lives will be won only at the cost of pain and suffering.

To the woman he said,
'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.'

And to the man he said,
'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
"You shall not eat of it",
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.'

The ensuing chapters of Genesis bring together interminable lists of patriarchs and their families, and these are broken up by the account of the Flood and the account of the Tower of Babel. In both of these, humankind, in consequence of the Fall, incurs God's wrath, and in each case, is put firmly in its place. The Tower of Babel, being as it is the source of the imagery used in the account of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles, is possibly the more important episode in the story, but the Flood is more dramatic, so over the centuries it has been the story more often told. But let me remind you of the Tower of Babel:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Commentators suggest that this story was created in order to explain the variety of languages and races across the earth, just as they say the story of the Fall was created in order to explain the reality of sin. But I wonder whether there is something more profound and realistic in the Tower of Babel, linked very much with the mystery of sin and imperfection set out in the account of the Fall. The Lord is recorded as saying: 'This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.'

The existence of strands of science and of theology that work on the assumption that humanity is on a road of constant progress towards perfection in many ways vindicates the prophetic words reported in the Babel story. And as I indicated at the end of yesterday's address, the reality we are faced with is one where humankind messes up every time it assumes that it will find nothing to be impossible.

I think the quality of life debate is one of those areas that underline the limitations of human intellect and morality. It involves questions which we know we need to address, yet it is also an area where the drawing of appropriate lines seems utterly impossible. Let me briefly outline some of the issues.

It has proven impossible to locate a generally acceptable point at which medical science ought to be able to help people to end their lives. The major issues here are the lack of a common understanding of the nature of unbearable suffering, together with the suspicion of misuse by unscrupulous relatives and medical professionals in order to rid themselves of the inconvenience of caring for the chronically ill.

The question of abortion continues to be controversial because of the presence of several lines in the sand over which agreement is impossible to reach. The point at which human life is independently discernible and should be protected; the judgement over whether it is acceptable to require a woman to continue with an unwanted pregnancy, combined with the effect on an unwanted child being brought into the world; the very difficult judgement now all too commonly made that assumes children with conditions like Down Syndrome should not be brought into the world at all. Should we really assume the position where medical science or political debate can decide for us all what constitutes a viable or acceptable human life?

And reading legal fiction provides a reminder of those parts of the world where life is routinely costed by judges and juries in criminal and other liability cases. Someone with life-limiting injuries stands not only to have the ongoing cost of their treatment and support assessed, but also the cost to their family of losing their earnings potential. The quality of life is here – actually quite reasonably – boiled down to money.

So the question is: how *do* we measure the quality of life? What is the bottom line for a life worth living? In an age when we are aware of mental health issues more than ever before, is it reasonable for us to believe it is possible to assess whether a person is actually in a proper state of mind to judge whether they live or whether they die; and in an age when we have (or at least have had) better support than ever before for people living with disabilities of every sort, how can it be reasonable to end an embryonic life because that person will grow up disabled in some way, and what level of disability is going to form the cut-off point for a life deemed worth living?

I know that there are people here this evening who have had to wrestle with such issues first-hand – in any group there will be some, for the issues around quality of life are very widespread – and even if you have not had to do so, you'd need to be pretty devoid of empathy in order not to appreciate the near impossibility of reaching a right answer in any individual case, let alone creating a universal code to assure us that we will always reach a conclusion that is right for the people concerned.

Now at this point some would suggest the application of science to find an answer. I am not going to do that, partly because my sciences are those of philosophy and theology, rather than the natural sciences, partly because – as I indicated on Sunday evening – I am not convinced by scientists who think complete answers can be found; and finally because in preparation for tomorrow I have been re-visiting some thoughts on quantum theory, so what little scientific brain I have has already been fried.

Instead I am going to take us straight back to what I was trying to indicate by using the stories from Genesis about the Fall and about the Tower of Babel. Both these stories are basically about what happens when humanity thinks it is able to know everything and to have the answers for everything. You could if you want see here a tyrannical God denying humanity its ultimate aspirations; or you could see a kind God trying to help humanity live with its limitations.

I've spoken before about one the main principles of dog training. A dog that thinks it can be the alpha male (or female) in a human household is already set up to fail, for it cannot control matters in the way it would in a pack situation where the pack consists only of dogs. If you are able to get the dog to accept *you* as the alpha, the dog immediately relaxes and is much more happy – it knows its place in life.

Oppressive societies have quite rightly led us to resist being told what our place in life really is, yet the issues we have been grappling with in these addresses show up our real limitations. We can go if we want with the natural scientists and even theologians who still believe we can progress and develop until we become ourselves like God, or we can take the route that Jesus maps out for us, which looks very different.

Saint Paul – who is the great advocate for the cosmic significance of Christ – sums this up in a passage often read during Holy Week:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

There is a sometimes delicate, sometimes brutal, interplay between the human aspiration to know everything and to be able to get everything right, and the reality of human limitation. The Christian understanding of the Incarnation and of the Cross reveals to us a God who does not give us all the answers, who is not in the business of pulling our irons out of the fire, yet who is content to share our own humility, so that in the context of eternity, when the realm of existence as a whole becomes open to us in God, we can learn to rejoice in the exaltation of what we thought was humble, but in reality was the key to eternal life.

Tomorrow's address is going to grapple with what eternal life really is. For today, if we are able to leave this place a little more content in our fate – which is to keep struggling with the great dilemmas of what makes life worth living, and through that struggle to participate in the humility of knowing we can't find the perfect answer – then we will have learned or re-learned something which is the key to our own quality of life.

And if you still worry about getting it wrong, the poet Heinrich Heine – whose tragic poetry is witness to his own life mistakes – offers us this thought: *He who in his life has never made a fool of himself has also never been wise.*

Let me end with some words which are probably the source for the text we think of wrongly as the Prayer of Saint Francis. They are in fact the *Golden Sayings of Giles of Assisi*, and they offer a key to a life that is worth living.

Blessed is he who loves and does not therefore desire to be loved;
Blessed is he who fears and does not therefore desire to be feared;
Blessed is he who serves and does not therefore desire to be served;
Blessed is he who behaves well toward others
and does not desire that others behave well toward him;
And because these are great things, the foolish do not rise to them.

PC, 4th April 2023