

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

December 1st 2024 – **Advent Sunday**

The Four Last Things (1) Death

Since September, maybe even August, some shops have been telling us that Christmas is coming. Christmas is indeed coming! But we can leave the goose to go on getting fat for a while, because we have another season to enjoy first – Advent.

I say 'enjoy'. The putting on of purple in church, and the traditional Advent themes of death, judgment, heaven and hell, may not immediately bring the word 'enjoy' to mind. I mean it in the richest sense. When we take Advent seriously, we have the chance to make good and beneficial use of the time in preparation for the feast of Christmas.

Like Lent, Advent is a time for deep and serious reflection. Unlike Lent, it's not so much about inward examination and penitence. It's more about looking outwards, looking to the farthest horizon of our world and even of our imagination; it's about pondering some very big themes, and how those themes matter in our lives, how they inform our lives.

Death, judgment, heaven and hell can often be, as they say, like elephants in the room. Rather big, unwise to ignore, but polite not to mention. Some prefer to talk in Advent of hope, peace, love and joy. They have become the more user-friendly themes for Advent. Well of course, a faith which didn't want to shout from the rooftops about hope, peace, love and joy would be a very shrivelled-up sort of faith. But without the underpinning of an understanding of those other themes, we would risk being built on sand, or relying on a sort of fridge magnet optimism. It's only when we dare to think about those themes, those four last things, as they are often called, and when we let God accompany us through such thinking, that we can really find hope – find real hope. Our daring, or courage, is in facing things which don't just sound frightening, but which genuinely are frightening. But the hope we discover means that in every case – death, judgment, heaven and even hell – our courage is a little bit rewarded. And so my hope is that this Advent's four sermons are ultimately the source of good news. On the traditional language of the season, we journey through some darkness to reach a magnificent light.

So today let us think on Death. One of the great, great privileges of being a priest is that you spend time with the dying. I have spent time with some wonderful people as they have approached death. Two of these where when I was a curate. In both cases they knew what was coming, and faced it with a kind of realistic Christian confidence which was simply uplifting. I say 'realistic' because they were also uncomfortable and a little afraid. One had been a nurse, and she told me that when you've seen all the possible ways of dying, there are too many frightening things in your imagination. They were living with pain. And death is still death, the greatest unknown that we all know we have to meet. So they weren't just showing a blithe complacency. But they did have an underlying confidence in the mercy of God, the assurance of the mercy of God, which for both came from a long-held Christian faith.

For many others, of course, death does not come so gently or with such acquiescence. This is why we can recognise that there are powerful and understandable reasons why many have supported the Assisted Dying bill, whatever our own views. At other times there is a terrible suddenness which means that there's no time for acquiescence or anger or terror. Or rather, they are for those left behind.

You see this is a priest too. I've taken the funeral of a man who was murdered outside a pub, in a homophobic attack. I've said a requiem Mass for a young man who fell in front of a train in what was a tragic accident. He'd been redesigning our churchyard garden of rest. I've sat with more than one mother preparing for the funeral of her stillborn child. The sight of a 17-year-old boy carrying the tiny pink coffin of his stillborn child is branded on my memory.

There were a lot of people in church at those services whose view of God was not very positive.

I can't begin to suggest a simple answer to such a complex web of experiences. We do know from scripture, and especially the Psalms, that we have a licence to say what we like to God – especially when we are grief-stricken. He is not just an impressive, impassive concept; nor is he the wilful manipulator of so many

events which seem tragic, wasteful, appalling. He is the very origin of our being and of all that is; but he is also the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, and the one with whom we can have the closest, most intense personal relationship.

This includes, of course, in our liturgies. The old rites of the Requiem and the Dirige (or Dirge) included psalms and passages from the Book of Job which were great outpourings of frustration, anger and confusion. Like this -

Your hands have made me, and fashioned me about, and yet now you destroy me....

So much of what we know about death – about particular deaths or about types of death which anger or upset us – so much of this is wrapped up in an even bigger mystery. That is, why a world created and sustained by a loving and all-powerful God can have so much that is horrible going on in it. There's no straightforward answer to this. If there were, the world would be either 98% Christian or 98% atheist, depending on the answer.

One small chink of understanding might be in this. I would want to say that we must believe that every single moment of pain or anguish is, in some vital sense, known by God himself. Not just known as a matter of fact, but known keenly. This is the nerve-system which runs through the whole of humanity, and which has its heart in the cross of Christ. The Christ who died in agony was God as well as man.

I don't know a more powerful way of grasping this nerve-system of God's sharing in our pain than the story of the boy in the Nazi concentration camp. There was a lively, lovely boy of 12 or so who was the camp's favourite, and who was allowed much leeway even by the guards. One morning, though, all the inmates were lined up. In reprisal for some misdemeanour by others in the camp, the boy had been hung from a hook, in front of them all, dying. 'Where the hell is God now?' whispers one person. 'Hanging there', comes the answer.

So: God knows our pain and fear and even our dying, and knows it as keenly as we do. And we are allowed to rail at him in our agony and anger.

Ultimately we have to look at death in the light of what Christmas itself is about. The Incarnation, the coming among us of God-with-us, tells us something to which we must always return – that God loves us so much that he became human to redeem us, to bring us home, to offer us an ultimate healing. In doing so he demonstrated beyond all doubt that we are loved body and soul. The body matters, and so pain and death matter. They all matter so much that death turns out to be the gateway to the rest of life: frightening, probably painful, mysterious, and monumental – but the moment through which we pass into eternity, ready to see the full majesty of God's love and mercy, to see Jesus' arms stretched wide in smiling welcome.

Or, as that beautifully powerful Collect in the 1662 Burial Service puts, when we hear the blessing *which thy well-beloved Son shall then pronounce to all that love and fear thee, saying, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world.*