
How to Die

Romans 8.28-39

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 3, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Woody Allen once said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work... I want to achieve it through not dying." Not long ago I sat by the bedside of a man who felt just the same way. He knew he had just a few days to live. "I want to do something for my wife and my children," he said, "And maybe for my friends as well. I can't think of anything I can give them now, stuck here in this bed." I said to him, "Have you ever thought that you're more than capable of giving them one of the most precious gifts anyone could give, a gift all the more precious because it's so rare?" "What gift might that be?" he said. I waited to see if he would look at his circumstances and guess for himself, but after some moments of silence, I said, "A good death."

What is a good death? A good death is a window into the glory of God. A good death is a revelation of Paul's conviction that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." The reality of modern medicine is that relatively few of us will be fully conscious, lucid and full of parting wisdom, up to the very moment of our deaths. As one person said, "On the plus side, death is one of the few things that can be done just as easily lying down." The various tubes and machines will more often than not keep us technically going for some period of time after our last conscious thought or word. So we need to start getting our plans in order now, ahead of time, if we intend to give our families, friends and society the gift of a good death. Preparing us for a good death forces us to live a good life. The less you can do about the length of your life, the more you need to attend to its breadth and depth.

We probably all know people who are either so worried about the future or so angry or regretful or otherwise burdened about the past that they seem to spend little or none of their lives in the present tense. The first thing to hope for as we approach the reality of death is to find or receive the grace to be *present*, to live in the present tense. Finding the ability to live in the present is very similar to what many people call being "at peace." To live in the present tense and be at peace in the face of death requires two things.

(1) It requires us to believe that the past is taken care of. This is fundamentally a matter of coming to terms with our humanity. Few if any of us can honestly say our lives turned out as we had hoped or expected. It's easy, perhaps natural, to apportion blame for that. (a) If grievances and resentments are heavy on our heart and the gift of forgiveness hasn't accompanied a long journey of healing, it can be easy to blame others for everything. (b) But we can just as easily blame ourselves. For a great many people, the difficulty of accepting forgiveness is at least as much of an obstacle to a good death as the difficulty of offering forgiveness. (c) Yet we can also blame Life, or God, whichever we choose to call it, for the quirks of science or nature or the economy or history, that made our life less than we would have liked it to be. In the words of one rueful commentator, "Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering - and it's all over much too soon." Whether mocked or praised by others, whether starting from great privilege and prospects or from lowly fortune and station, whether littered with accolades and achievements or with setbacks and shame, so many of us regard our lives as more or less a failure.

In all these ways looking back on the past is coming to terms with our humanity, with the humanity of those around us, and with the limitations and weaknesses of the human spirit. Life and death are both about coming to terms with these limitations, and for the person who has learned to live with others, with themselves, and with the contingency of circumstances, we have a word: we call that person patient.

(2) I said that living in the present tense requires two things, and we discovered that the first one is to believe the past is taken care of. The second one, which might seem even more pressing in the face of death, is to believe the future is taken care of. If letting go of the past is fundamentally about coming to terms with our humanity, opening our lives wholeheartedly to the future is fundamentally about coming to terms with God's divinity. Now the future is unknown. For many, perhaps most, people the unknown that lies beyond the threshold of death is simply the most terrifying thing in all human comprehension, precisely because it defies

human comprehension. I'm going to attempt briefly to break that terror down into its constituent elements, to make it easier to talk about.

(a) For some people the big fear beyond death is judgement. For most of Christian history this has been what Christianity was really all about – preparing you to face the finality of judgement, and its bifurcation between heaven and hell. It's amazing how this has become so much less of an issue to people in the last 150 years, and consequently how attention has focused so much more on the conditions and possibilities and desire for justice in this present life. Nonetheless, the fear of hell weighs heavy on many of us as we approach death. While we may not imagine perpetual fire or gnashing of teeth, it's not hard to imagine being alone for ever, a very gloomy prospect. And if one adds to that the possibility of everlasting pain, whether due to punishment or some other reason connected to the continuation in some form of our sense experience, it's too much to bear to think about.

(b) Perhaps the biggest fear for the contemporary imagination, captivated as most of us are by the realization and fulfilment of the individual self, is that beyond death lies simply oblivion. It is rationally hard to square the myriad complexity and texture of human existence before death with total emptiness afterwards. But when we witness the mundane biological process of death in animals and plants, there can seem little observational reason to argue that humans will be significantly different. As Johnny Carson famously said, "For three days after death hair and fingernails continue to grow but phone calls taper off." We're left with just our bodies and the worms. All the restorative qualities of sleep suddenly go out the window, and we are faced with a sleep without end, a complete annihilation of the self – for many, perhaps most of us, a horrifying prospect.

When St Paul is writing the stirring words which conclude the eighth chapter of his Letter to the Romans, he is addressing precisely these overwhelming fears – the fear of judgement, or at least of being eternally alone or perpetually in pain, and the fear of oblivion, of one's consciousness being wiped out of the drama of existence. He is telling his readers, "Each one of you is precious in God's sight. You are not merely biological human products. You are known, loved, called, redeemed, chosen. And you will be glorified. A whole set of forces may be against you – hostile others, troubling and extreme circumstances, even yourself: but if God is on your side, none of these will overcome you – indeed *you* will overcome *them*, with something to spare. No power, nothing in the past, nothing in the future, no biological necessity, no demise of human cells, no amount of pain and no sense of isolation will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So in the face of our fear of *judgement*, the good news is God in Christ is *for* us. This is what we discover in Jesus' healing ministry in Galilee and what we see when Jesus takes God and the world's punishment on our behalf on Golgotha. And in the face of *oblivion* the good news is God in Christ is *with* us. This is what we realize is God's earthly purpose when Jesus comes among us as a baby at Christmas and what we discover is God's eternal purpose when Jesus returns to us as our risen Lord at Easter. God is *for* us and God is *with* us. This is the essence of the good news of Christ.

To bring these claims back to our mundane and needy emotional experience, our biggest fears about those we love are that either they will come to hate us or they will forget about us. St Paul is telling us that in our eternal relationship with God neither of these eventualities is possible. God *cannot* turn against us and God *cannot* forget about us. Because of Jesus we will remain perpetually at the forefront of God's heart and mind. This is the gospel. This is the good news about the future that enables us to see our lives through to a good death.

That doesn't mean we don't still have fears about judgement and oblivion. The point about the assurance of Paul's words is that they enable us to face the future *in spite of* our fears about judgement and oblivion. Faith doesn't obliterate fear, but it enables us to live without being paralyzed by fear, and thus to take the practical steps that witness to our hope beyond death. For the person who is able to live in this assurance, for the person who is able to find the grace to go on in the face of fear, for the person who can open their life to the unknown realm beyond death, we have a word: we call that person a person of courage.

And that brings me back to the conversation I had at that hospital bedside some short while ago. The gift of a good death, that last and most precious gift one can give one's family, friends and society, is fundamentally a witness of *patience* and *courage*. Patience to accept one's powerlessness to change the past, and courage to open

one's life to the overwhelming unknown of the future. Patience to live with one's humanity, and courage to face God's divinity. That is what it means to make a final offering of a good death.

And that's why it's so hard to accept that the practice of euthanasia can ever constitute a good death. The irony is that the term euthanasia literally means "good death." It's an awful thing to watch a loved one face a slow and painful, perhaps agonizing, decline towards an inevitable but perhaps relatively distant death. Few if any of us would find words to criticize a loved one who looked to a technological escape from a situation of progressive and extreme physical distress and debilitation. But our compassion shouldn't blind us to the fact that there's a genuine difference between passively withholding treatment and active euthanasia.

Continuing treatment, if treatment is no more than delaying the moment of death, serves no purpose. As Arthur Hugh Clough famously puts it, "Thou shalt not kill but needst not strive, officiously, to keep alive." But actively killing, which is what euthanasia entails, is another matter. Killing those we can't cure and those whose pain we can't ease is an outright rejection of the claims of Paul in Romans chapter 8. Euthanasia is a denial that God is for us and that God is with us. Euthanasia assumes that patience and courage are too much to expect of anybody. Euthanasia is a statement that perpetual oblivion is better than temporary agony. The legacy bequeathed by the practice of euthanasia is a world that has turned life into a disposable commodity, sees memory as a burden and hope as a fantasy, assumes friendship is inadequate and we each die alone, and thus has no particular use for patience or courage, the only virtues that can really give us a good death.

Imagine a society without patience and courage. A society without patience is one that values only what can be had straightaway, searches for technological solutions to every problem, denies the existence of issues that can't be quickly and forcibly resolved, and ends up describing as solutions anything that seems to make the problem go away, even if the solution is worse than the problem. A society without courage has nothing to offer in the face of fear but perpetual distraction, through entertainment, stimulation, or fantasy. It's a society that has left truth and reality behind and headed off in search of something less demanding.

And so a genuinely good death is a gift not just to one's friends and family but to society as a whole. A genuinely good death not only requires and inspires patience and courage on the part of the individual; it requires and inspires a matching patience and courage on the part of family, friends and society, because it can be a fearful and paralyzing thing to watch a person you love decline, diminish, and quite possibly suffer. If the dying person cannot, for good reasons or bad, find the resources to exhibit patience and courage, their family and friends simply have to supply the shortfall. A genuinely good death is a witness from all parties and to all parties that patience and courage are possible, even in the face of profound sadness, even in the face of crippling fear, even in the face of trying and distressing circumstances. A genuinely good death proclaims that God is for us and God is with us and nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. A genuinely good death is a window into the glory of God, a promise that, in Christ, the future is always bigger than the past, a moment of truth that says what lies ahead is not a threat of obliteration but the gift of completion. God has given us the assurance of his love and the promise of his presence, whatever happens. Let us resolve to give him in return the most significant witness we can offer: the gift of a good death.