

2 before Lent, Sunday 7 February, 10.15 Eucharist, St James, Colwall.
Genesis 2: 4 – 9, 15 – end, Revelation 4, Luke 8: 22 – 25.

This is the first Sermon here since Anne gave her definitive Sermon on how to do it! Whether or not you end up 'grateful and galvanised', only you will know!

I do have a particular memory, though, about Sermons I heard as I grew up. If the Rector began the Sermon with a story – especially a jokey one – we were in for some serious stuff.

So here is one.

A doctor bent over the lifeless figure in bed. Then he straightened up and said, “I am sorry to say that your husband is no more, my dear.”

A feeble sound of protest came from the lifeless figure in bed. “No, I'm still alive.”

“Hold your tongue,” said the woman. “The doctor knows better than you.”

Sometimes our belief in authority endangers our perception.

But it is equally true that our disregard for authority endangers our perception.

Which brings me to our readings.

From the Gospel we have just heard. Jesus stilling the storm – still fearful, the disciples marvelled and asked, “who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him?”

There could only be one answer.

They knew of only one source of such power and authority. God, the creator of the earth, sea and sky. Of all living things. Creator of Man and Woman.

They had just witnessed Jesus exercising that power and authority.

And in the Revelation of St John the Divine, we were given his vision of the heavenly worship. A bejewelled being, who lives for ever and ever, sitting on a throne in a sea of crystal, surrounded by thunderings, lightnings and fires, and winged creatures forever singing,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”

And the white-clad elders with golden crowns, bowing down and casting their crowns before the throne singing,

“Worthy art thou, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for thou didst create all things,
and by thy will they existed and were created.”

These are all images, at the beginning of time, in time, and beyond time, of our omnipotent Creator. In whose image we were created.

The Almighty God, in whom we live, and move and have our being.

It is in that context, that I want refer to assisted dying. A matter that surfaces from time to time.

Usually when Parliament debates the issue with a view to deciding whether or not to legislate for it. It remains illegal.

Over the past year there have been an increasing number of people travelling to Switzerland for assisted deaths. There have been a number of prosecutions here with both guilty and non-guilty verdicts. Sir Terry Pratchett, suffering an early form of Alzheimer's, has engaged with the idea of assisted dying tribunals in the Richard Dimbleby lecture earlier this week.

The debate is gaining a new momentum. As Christians we will be involved in it. In church circles. With our next door neighbours. With colleagues at work. In coming to our own personal standpoint about assisted dying.

That said, it seems to me that the debate, and particularly the media comment, ignores the essential role God plays in life. If we do that, we endanger our perception of the issue. I am going to end by simply reminding all us of a Christian view, which fills out this statement by our Church of England:

The Church of England is opposed to any change in the law, or medical practice, to make assisted suicide permissible or acceptable.

I quote the Methodist Church:

Our fellowship with God is an essential aspect of life. It is an unbreakable relationship that gives life its eternal dimension.

Death is an event in that life, marking a transition rather than a terminus.

Jesus often intervened in sickness in order to restore health. He taught that death is not a final disaster and demonstrated by his resurrection its transitional rather than final nature.

Jesus pleads for the love in all our actions – this includes compassion for others, and the need to fight those things which demean human relationships or the significance of the individual.

The final stage of an illness is not one which need represent the ultimate defeat for the doctor or nurse, but a supreme opportunity to help the patient at many levels, including those relating to emotional and spiritual well-being – specialised hospices demonstrate that it is possible to deal with all the symptoms which cause problems to the patient.

I believe it is important to have such an accepted Christian starting point when we discuss or express an opinion about assisted dying. Many of which will be based on our own personal experience with loved ones.

There can be other Christian perspectives. I've intentionally left aside any pastoral considerations of personal choice by carers or the dying, of responsibility to protect life, of compassion, of the whole ministry of dying between those involved. For a very moving account of just these considerations, I'd refer you to the interview this morning on the 'Sunday' programme with Marie-Anne Talbot about her caring for her mother with Alzheimer's. Or her blog on the SAGA website called "Keeping Mum"

But at least, by including God in the equation - God "who was, and is, and is to come," - we won't be arguing from a position of total ignorance or endangered perception.

So, go home, and look at this question of assisted dying from a specifically Christian point of view. And if you then conclude that you can make a real difference to the debate, I'll have gone some way to meeting the gauntlet Anne threw from this spot two weeks ago.

I pray it may be so.

Amen.