

Sermon

Sunday 17th May, 2009

Lessons Genesis 35: 9 - 15 1 John 5: 1 – 6 St John 15: 9 – 17

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Give us, O Lord, a pure judgement and a sincere love of Your Word; that we be not deceived and carried away by any falsehood, but may grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The author of the First Letter of John wrote, ‘For to love God is to keep his commands; and these are not burdensome, because every child of God overcomes the world. Now, the victory by which the world is overcome is our faith, for who is victor over the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?’

1 John 5: 3-5

At this year’s General Assembly, the Church and Society Council will as part of its report present a paper entitled ‘End of Life Issues.’ In the paper, the Council reflects on palliative care, Advance Decisions (popularly known as living wills), sedation and assisted dying or euthanasia, among other things. Insofar as I can within the limits of a sermon, I would like to reflect on this paper. I want to do so because as Joan Bakewell puts it:

[End of life issues] won’t go away because we are living longer into an old age that brings with it all the humiliations of being helpless, incontinent and in pain.

What is more, there are high profile cases of individuals travelling to Switzerland, to the *Dignitas* clinic, to a country where assisted dying does not breach the law. Some one hundred British subjects have done so and not one of those who accompanied them have been prosecuted on their return. In a recent article in *The Times*, Bakewell states:

Last December, the parents of Daniel James were told they would not face charges for travelling to Zurich with their son. Yet, oddly, when Debbie Purdy, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, sought reassurance from the courts that her husband, were he to travel with her, would not be prosecuted she was refused. This is a mess. And we all know it.

You may remember the case of Daniel James, the twenty-three year old rugby player who died in a Swiss clinic after being paralysed in an accident. The Coroner recorded a verdict of suicide. The Public Prosecution Service said that it had sufficient evidence that Daniel's parents had breached the 1961 Suicide Act but that a prosecution would not be in the public interest. While I understand the decision of the court in the Debbie Purdy case, it is a mess when courts are defending laws for which, when broken, the prosecution services fail to pursue a prosecution. This morning I want to offer some thoughts on the paper which the General Assembly will receive later this week, not least because I think that there may be more than one *Christian* point of view.

Firstly, however, let me begin with a story. Anne Turner, a retired doctor from Bath, who suffered from progressive supranuclear palsy, a rare disease which involves the deterioration and death of parts of the brain. Dr Turner died with the help of *Dignitas*, the Swiss assisted suicide organisation, in January 2006, aged 66. It was a not a low-key event: she was accompanied by a BBC crew and it made headline news. Speaking in December last year, Dr Turner's daughter, Sophie, said that while many people have expressed their sympathy,

there are friends who have still not acknowledged her mother's death. Sophie said:

We have a real problem with grief and death in this country. People avoid the subject. Our mother said when we were growing up that you should not ostracise people who are grieving. It is very good advice.

Dr Turner's son, Edward, spoke of his feelings of rejection that his mother would choose to leave him early. He said:

In my selfish world, I thought, 'My mother's one of the most important people in my life. How can she not place the same value on our relationship?

And, then, he said:

It was only when I stopped being selfish that I could cope with it.

The Turner family is convinced that their mother's assisted death was the right and compassionate thing and they are thankful that she was spared further suffering. Sophie said that what had made her mother's death most difficult to cope with was the fact that she was very alive one minute and dead the next. In her mother's final days, the family had accompanied their mother to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, they had gone on a boat trip and they had gone out to dinner together. Sophie's point is that, because it is illegal to assist dying in this country, people have to be fit enough to travel abroad and may end up ending their life earlier than they would otherwise if they could be assured of an assisted death here. Sophie states, 'Had a *Dignitas* equivalent existed in

Britain, she would have lived longer, celebrated Edward's 40th birthday and his civil partnership ceremony to his partner, Stephen.'

Dr Turner's son, Edward, said that the family is not haunted by their witnessing their mother's death. What haunts them is the memory of their father's lingering, natural death in 2002. Their father, Jack, deliberately starved and dehydrated himself in hospital to end his suffering from multiple system atrophy, an incurable condition similar to his wife. Sophie said:

You'd think that seeing my mother die would have long-lasting, negative consequences, but I think it made it easier because it was a better death. We had seen our father decline. The last time I saw him he couldn't swallow. He had these swabs you could put in his mouth and he was obviously really thirsty because he was sucking at them like a baby. It was horrific.

It's odd that we let people do [what my father did] every day and it never makes the press but when my mother has a peaceful, painless, dignified, swift, demystified death it's front page news. It's so wrong, so unhealthy.

The Turner family, like so many others, has not been prosecuted.

What are the *Christian* responses to assisted death? The paper to the General Assembly begins with the words of St Paul:

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

The paper holds up the death of Abraham as the ideal death. In contrast to the many murders and massacres in the Old Testament, Abraham 'breathed his last

and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years.’ Without mapping its theological or philosophical progression, the paper states:

Euthanasia [is] opposed for a number of reasons: for example

God has forbidden it The command from God which says ‘you must not kill’ is usually interpreted as meaning ‘you must not murder.’ However, a broader interpretation is that you must not take human life. This rules out euthanasia...as carrying [it] out would be against God’s commandments, and would be an attack on the sovereignty of God.

Human life is special Human beings are made in God’s image, therefore they have a special value and dignity. This value doesn’t depend on the quality of a particular life, and taking a life violates that special value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering.

Human life is sacred The sanctity of human lives derives from the fact that God created them; therefore human life should be protected and preserved, whatever happens, and we shouldn’t interfere with God’s plans by shortening human lives.

The report concludes that more money is needed for palliative care. In a manner reminiscent of the Roman Catholic Church on this matter, biblical scholarship is cast adrift and argument is replaced by dogmatic statement. The paper to the General Assembly states, ‘Taking a life violates [human] value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering.’ Do we believe that – think of your own parents, partner, children? Whether it is the doctor who administers the medication leading to death (voluntary euthanasia) or the patient (assisted dying) the paper states that the Church will tolerate neither. In this paper, once accepted, the Church states that taking a life violates human value and dignity, even if that life is full of pain and suffering.

There is another Christian perspective on this matter, one which will not deny an individual the right to honour their God-given value and dignity through deciding themselves the manner in which they die. Powerlessness is one of the most dehumanising aspects of being a patient, of being incapacitated in some way, and to have your decision-making taken away at a most crucial moment of your life – that is, the moment of your death – seems to me to be a supreme indignity that no one should suffer, if at all possible. God has given us the power of reason and the power to take responsibility for our decisions. I acknowledge the weakness in so-called Advance Decisions or living wills because circumstances change but, in cases where the person has power of thought and reason, I am uneasy that the State or the Church should deny people the power to make their own decisions appropriate to their unique set of circumstances. No one is advocating irresponsibility.

Described by some as the greatest theologian alive today, Professor Hans Kung said that what was ‘decisive’ in his attitude to euthanasia was ‘the terribly slow process’ of his brother’s death. Over a process of a year, Kung states, ‘one limb after another, one organ after another ceased to function,’ and eventually ‘after days of gasping [my brother finally] choked on the rising fluid in his lungs.’ Theologically speaking, Kung states:

Those who trust in God at the same time trust that death is not the end. In the light of the Eternal One, who alone can grant ‘deep, deep eternity’

the death of mortal life becomes transcended into God's eternal life. As the old prayer for the dead in the eucharist has it, '*Vita mutatur, non tollitur*: life is transformed, not taken away.' So should I be anxiously concerned how short or long this life is finally to be?

'Kung believes strongly that if one believes in a life beyond death, then when death comes in the fullness of time it should be embraced and accepted, or even deliberately chosen, if the alternative is simply prolongation of this life "under conditions which are no longer commensurate with human dignity."' Kung states:

Precisely because I am convinced that another new life is intended for me, as a Christian I see myself given freedom by God to have a say in my dying, a say about the nature and time of my death – in so far as this is granted to me.

For Kung, insisting that people, our loved ones, put up with the most intolerable suffering over an extended period of time when we take seriously the Christian hope of resurrection seems very strange. The late Cardinal Basil Hume encouraged us to picture life as a pilgrimage towards God, a hope, an expectation, a 'looking forward to the vision of God.' Our life, he said, is a life towards death, 'a cause of peace, a cause of joy; one day forward, one step nearer.' In his reflections on the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, Cardinal Hume spoke of her as now 'locked for ever in God's ecstatic love.' When he was diagnosed with cancer, he called his friend Timothy Wright, the Abbot of Ampleforth. The abbot said, 'Congratulations! That's brilliant news! I wish I was coming with you.' The great theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as he was

led out to be hanged by the Nazis, he said, 'This is the end. For me the beginning of life.' In his book, *Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying?*, Professor Paul Badham states:

It is utterly paradoxical that today it is Christians who are characteristically seen as clinging to life, whereas in the early Church St Athanasius believed that the most convincing argument for belief in the resurrection of Jesus was the fact that Christians 'treat death as nothing...they go eagerly to meet it...rather than remain in this present life.' This is the genuinely Christian approach to the understanding of life. It would be good if it could once more be the case, as it was for the earliest Christians, that an assisted [death] at the very end of a fulfilled life could once again be described as 'a noble death.' It would also be an act of faith and trust, giving back to God the life we owe to him.

There is a genuine concern that if we change the culture to permit assisted dying we will end up on a slippery slope: that assisted dying will be extended to people who do not want it or could not give their informed consent; that palliative care will obviate the need for assisted dying; that funding for palliative care will diminish; and, trust between doctors and patients will be eroded. Commenting on the empirical evidence from the Netherlands and the US State of Oregon, Professor Raymond Tallis of the Royal College of Physicians, states that 'Every single one of those assumptions is false.'

What people want most is a sense of their value and dignity and the one thing that secures that more than anything else is the power of choice. In the US State of Oregon, only 1 in 25 who formally make a request for medication use it. What people want is piece of mind; they want to know that they will have

assistance to die if their condition becomes utterly unbearable to them. Edward Turner said of his mother, ‘The fact is that when my mother got approval to die she became a happier person.’

My text this morning is, ‘For to love God is to keep his commands; and these are not burdensome, because every child of God overcomes the world. Now, the victory by which the world is overcome is our faith, for who is victor over the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?’ Every child of God overcomes the world! Our faith enables us to overcome the world!

Amen.