

## Death

10 2 15

It's good to be here with you this evening. It's kind of Pasteur Yorann Lupin to have invited me to share this Table Ronde with him and you tonight. I apologize that my mother tongue is English, that I'm not a native French speaker so the words I'll use and my pronunciation will, of necessity, be less than perfect as I try to share with you my understanding of our faith as best I can.

Three questions:

- What is Man ?
- Are we immortal ?
- What is death ?



What is Man that you are mindful of him ?

Psalm 8 v4

Have you ever wondered what it means to be human ? What does it mean to be a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, an adult, a child ?

Wonder is a great word, a good word to use, because to wonder is an invitation to reflect on and to explore the crown of God's creation – Mankind.

According to Genesis, the first book of our Bible, Adam was the first man; Eve the first woman. In the story of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, we have a picture of that moment when God created Man. In verse 7, we read: **'Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.'** There we have it. Man is animated by the breath of God, by the breath of life. We are formed from the dust of the ground which is a nice image to say we are physical, corporeal beings, but that the life force within us, our spirit, the animating principle, is a direct gift of a loving God, of a God who loves us enough to give us life and to give his life for us.

But let's step back one chapter to the opening of Genesis, to the climax of the seven day account of creation. In verse 27, we have this statement: **'So God created Man in his own image, in the image of God, he created him; male and female he created them.'** In some respect, we are made in the image of God. For me, to be made in the image of God means that we are alive, awake, aware, that we are conscious beings with a conscience. We know the difference between right and wrong, between doing good and doing evil. We know who we are, our identity, we know what it means for me to be me, the Reverend Gareth John Randall, the Anglican priest of St Bartholomew's Church, Dinard. Above all, each one of us is aware of our own mortality, the fact that we will all one day die.

But let me highlight just three things:

- the fact that we can use language to communicate;

- the fact that, though we are each of us individuals, we are all of us social creatures who exist not in isolation but as part of a family, a community, a nation;
- the fact that we are tool makers, that we can use our hands our fingers and our thumbs to work, to build and to create.

And the consequence: God intends us to be stewards of his creation: in Genesis 1 v28 we read, 'God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

So, in answer to the question that the Psalmist poses, 'What is man?', let me simply say that we are physical beings, animated by God, and that, made in his image, we have the wherewithal to be responsible stewards of God's creation here and now on earth.



For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus,  
God will bring with him those who have died.

1 Thessalonians 4 v 14

Are we mortal or immortal ? No and yes.

We are both: mortal since life will end and so, necessarily, all will die; and we are immortal since, through the fact of the Resurrection, we have the hope of eternal life, of everlasting life, as we affirm each week in the Nicene Creed, 'we believe in the resurrection of the body and life of the world to come.'

There is no doubt that when we die, after our body is buried or cremated, that what is mortal, physical, will decay and return to the earth from whence we originally come.

But we, as Christians, have this hope which I guess St Paul sets out best in 1 Corinthians 15. In the thirteenth chapter of the same letter, Paul defined 'Agape', the love of God, climaxing in the idea of life after death: 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face-to-face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully even as I have been fully known.'(v12) Just two chapters on, there is the wonderful outworking of that love: that we do not cease to be in death. In chapter 15 verse 12, Paul asks a rhetorical question, thereby firmly stating our belief in the life of the world to come: 'Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead ?' Our Christian hope stretches beyond the grave to eternity as Paul goes on to indicate

in verse 19, 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.'

Then, it's back to Genesis as Paul cites, in verse 22, the consequences of Adam's sin, balanced by the beneficial effect of Christ's resurrection: 'For as in Adam all die even so in Christ shall all be made alive.' (AV) So there is the promise of immortality to us who are clearly mortal.

So, again, I ask the question 'Are we immortal ?' and again I simply reply, 'No and yes.' No and yes because we who are in the flesh and who are necessarily mortal, have the promise of bodily resurrection on account of Christ's resurrection on the third day, a life after death which is implied in Jesus' promise to the penitent thief on the cross, 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' (Luke 23 v 43) And that, too, is our hope I trust !



*Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live*

Job 14 v 1

In November 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Jean Baptiste Le Roi 'But in this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.'

Death then is a fact of life. If we are born, we are certain to die. Two Biblical exceptions: the prophet Elijah who was swept up into heaven on a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2 v11) and Enoch who was taken up into heaven (Genesis 5 v24). But as for the rest of us, like our parents, Adam and Eve, die we must – that is what it is to be human, to be mortal.

So what is death ? What happens when we die ? Essentially, our body stops working. We stop breathing; our heart stops; our bloods ceases to flow; we lose consciousness; stop thinking; stop moving.

We are not only corporal but spiritual beings. We have not only a body but also a soul. When our body dies, our spirit is not extinguished but leaves the body. That is what the funeral service is about. A chance to lay the soul to rest, respectfully to commit the body to earth in burial or through cremation, return our physical body to the earth from which it comes, dust back to dust.

But back to St Paul and 1 Corinthians 15 v54/55. There is a note of triumph, the sound of victory with a triumphant assertion that the resurrection of Christ spells the death of death. In the King James Bible we read:

Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death where is thy sting

O grave where is thy victory

Death may have the upper hand in our lifetime but there is the promise of the life to come which will result in the death of death as the C17 priest poet, John Donne, wrote in his sonnet entitled 'Death' 'then death thou shalt die'

So what is death ? Death is the moment when we stop breathing, when our God-given life force, our soul, departs the body. But according to our faith, our belief in the resurrection, death is not the end but a new beginning.



*Ecumenical conference*

*St Malo*

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G: Sermons 31 : Death

