

Sunday 13th November 2022
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on 1 Peter 1:3-5
Theme: “What will happen after I die?”
“Don’t be afraid of dying. We have a ‘living hope’”!
***The Big Questions of life” (5)**

Introduction:

We are continuing a series on “The Big Questions of life”. We are getting to the end of the Church Year, so we are looking at questions that relate to our future, and the end of all things. Last week we looked at the question: “How does God want me to live the rest of my life?”

This week, we are looking at the question, “What will happen when I die?”, and next week, *the last Sunday of the Church Year*, we’ll look at the question, “What will heaven be like?”

So, “What will happen when you and I die?”

Part 1: The reality of death

Well, let me point out for a start: 100% of people do die, *one out of one people die....*

The reality of our coming death is something that we are reminded of *in all sorts of ways:*

- * **The Covid virus reminded us of this, especially in the early days, when huge numbers of people were dying from it all over the world....**
- * **We are reminded of our coming death every time we get a bad illness....**
- * **Old age and our decline in health as we get older, reminds us of our coming death....**
- * **As does a heart attack** (*cf. my tennis court experience on Jonathan’s 30th birthday*).

As the words of the funeral liturgy put it: “In the midst of life, we are in death”. Death is an ever-present reality in life. No family has not experienced death at some time or other.

There is an Asian story about a so-called ‘holy man’ which makes this very clear:

Apparently this ‘holy man’, this religious leader, arrived in a village and

found a large group of people gathered around the door of the chief's house. When they saw the 'holy man', they rushed to him and told him that the chief's son had died.

They asked him to try to bring the chief's son back to life.

Now the 'holy man' knew that he couldn't do that, but he hit on a way to make the villagers understand the reality of death. He said that he would bring the chief's son back to life if they brought rice to him from a house where there had been no death.

So the villagers scurried off and went from house to house looking for a house which had been visited by death. And of course, they couldn't find one. Every family in the villages, at some time or another, had had to endure the anguish of death.

In this way, the 'holy man' taught the villagers a valuable lesson: he taught them that death is an ever-present reality in life, a reality from which no-one can escape.

And how do most people the prospect of their coming death? With "fear"....

Well, as one local philosopher *at a previous church* once put it to me, "They are SHIT scared!!". And it's the reason why some people won't go to a cemetery and look into a grave at the coffin of a friend or a loved one....

This fear is spoken about in the New Testament writings. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, for example:

Jesus himself became like...(us) and shared...(our) human nature. He did this so that through his death he might destroy the Devil, who has the power over death, and in this way set free those who were slaves all their life because of their fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Woody Allen, the film maker, speaks of this overwhelming fear of death in an interview that he once did. In that interview, he stated that humankind is left with:

...alienation, loneliness (and) emptiness, verging on madness.... The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless
(quoted by John Smith in Advance Australia Where?, p.46).

And why do people have this fear of death? Fear of annihilation perhaps, fear of the unknown maybe.... But I think essentially it is because they fear the consequences of possibly fronting up to God and giving an account of their life....

Part 2: The different views about “death”

Well, what do people in Australia, *in general*, think about death and dying? People in our society face death in a number of ways, *at least they do when they dare to think about it (cf. the change in talking about “death” to talking about “passing away”)*.

- * Some people follow what I call **the ‘scientific’ view of death**. They see death as the end of everything. “Once you’re dead, you’re dead”, they say. “That’s it! There is no more”.

Such a view allows people to live their life as they want to; they eat, drink, and generally do what they want to, because they keep telling themselves that they have nothing to fear from death, *because death is the end!!*

- * Others in our society have what I call **the ‘wishful thinking’, view of death, or ‘the fairy tale’ view of death**. In a rather wishful manner, they believe that those who die automatically pass into a lovely world where all one’s friends and relatives are. So when some dies, often you’ll hear it said:
 - * **“Don’t worry, he’s in a much better place now”** or
 - * **“She’s with grandpa in heaven now”** or
 - * **“She’s an angel in heaven now** (*with regard to the death of an infant*).

Everyone will be in heaven, it is believed.... Only those people who are really bad, *those like the Adolf Hitlers and the Idi Amins*, will be shut out.

This view is based on a mixture of ‘wishful thinking’, tinged with aspects from the Christian narrative. This view can be seen in the cartoons that are in the newspapers after the death of someone prominent. When the cricketer Shane Warne died hours after his fellow cricketer Rod Marsh, I remember seeing a cartoon in the paper with the two of them walking together on the clouds towards the gates of heaven, *where it is assumed they are both let in, because they both were “good blokes”*.

The same sort of thing happened when Queen Elisabeth the Second died recently. In a cartoon in *The Advertiser*, she is pictured with her late husband walking on the clouds of heaven, *with one of their favourite corgi’s (Sat. Sept 10. 2022)*. My hope is that they both *will* be in God’s coming Kingdom, *because they both trusted in Jesus as their Saviour, not because they were “good” people*.

The point is that in popular thought, most people believe that we will live on, and that as long as you are a reasonably good person you will head off to heaven when you die. That's what I call the 'wishful thinking' view of death.

- * Then there is the so called **Eastern view of death** which has quite a few followers in our society, *particularly among migrants from India and some parts of Asia*. This is the belief that when you die, your soul goes into a baby that is about to be born. Such a view is called reincarnation, and *this is what Hindus, Buddhists, and the like believe*.

Related to this view is "a sort of low-grade popular nature-religion", which has elements of Buddhism. This is the belief *that at death one is absorbed into the wider world, into the wind and trees*. When Princess Diana died back a bit, one message left with flowers for her, spoke as if in the Princess's own voice:

I did not leave you at all. I am still with you. I am in the sun and the wind. I am even in the rain. I did not die. I am with you all (*Tom Wright, Surprised by HOPE, p. 16-17*).

This view has become so popular in our Western culture that virtually every secular funeral that you go to, includes words like this:

**Do not stand at my grave and weep;
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on the snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain...
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there. I do not die** (*Ibid, p. 16*)

So, there are all sorts of views about "death" out there in our society....

Part 3: The Christian view of death

Well, what's the Christian view of death?

What is it based on? Is it based on "wishful thinking", or is it based on concrete realities?

Very much the later! It is based firmly on Jesus' resurrection from the dead!!

This is what the writers of the New Testament books and letters say in echo of Jesus (*Matt 24:29-31; 36-44; John 11:25-26; 14:1-6*).

Listen to what Peter, for example, says in our Bible reading for this morning. He writes:

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, and which is kept in heaven for you. You are being kept safe, by faith, for a salvation which is ready to be revealed at the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Peter is stating that we who have been baptised have been born again to a new life, a life that is marked by us having a “living hope” for the future.

And what is this hope based on? “The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”. Our hope for the future is not a dead hope, *a hope that is based on wishful thinking*, but rather an alive hope, a hope that is certain because it is based on a concrete reality, *namely the resurrection of Jesus from the dead*.

This is what Peter is saying in our Bible reading:

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead....

And this is what Paul in his letters echoes and enlarges on again and again. Listen to what Paul has to say in his first letter to the Corinthians. There he writes:

Now, since our message is that Christ has been raised from death, how can some of you say that that the dead will not be raised to life? If that is true, it means that Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised from death, then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe....

But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised... (1 Cor. 15:12-20).

Just as Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day, so we will be raised from the dead by God when Jesus comes again in the glory at the Last Day.

The resurrection is an historical event that is attested to by the empty tomb, and by the countless witnesses who saw him alive again, prior to his ascension to heaven, *God's realm*. Paul summarises the evidence for Jesus' resurrection a little earlier in his first letter to the Corinthians:

³I passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins, as written in the Scriptures; ⁴that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later, as written in the Scriptures; ⁵that he appeared to Peter and then to all twelve apostles. ⁶Then he appeared to

more than five hundred of his followers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, and afterward to all the apostles.

⁸ Last of all he appeared also to me—even though I am like someone whose birth was abnormal.

And to this evidence, I would add:

- * **The witness of the women who saw Jesus alive again**
- * **The transformation of the disciples from a group of individuals scared for their lives to a group of people who were willing to fearlessly proclaim the Gospel** (*Mark 14:50; Acts 2:14-42*)
- * **The willingness of the disciples and other Christians to give up their life for what they knew to be true**
- * **Their change from worship on the Saturday, the holy day for Jews, to worship on the Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection.**

By the way, our hope for the future is based on God's raising of Jesus from the dead, not based on any notion of "the immortality of the soul". Sure, we may have soul which continues on *after we die* in God's care, and we may not, *I don't know for sure*, but this is not what our hope for the future is based on (*Matt 10:28; 1 Peter 3:19; 4:6; Rev. 6:9; cf. 1 Thess 4:13; 1 Cor. 15:20*).

No, as Creeds confess:

- * **"I believe in...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting"** (*Apostles' Creed*)
- * **"I look for...the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come"** (*Nicene Creed*)

What will happen when Jesus returns again in glory at the Last Day? We *and everyone* will be raised from the dead, and there will be a great separation between those who are God's forgiven children, *through their faith in Jesus as their Saviour*, and those who have rejected God, and Jesus and their Saviour.

Jesus spoke about this in his so-called *Parable of the Last Judgement*:

³¹ **"When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, ³² and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him.**

Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

³³ **He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to the people on his right, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for**

you ever since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you fed me....

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Away from me, you that are under God’s curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! ⁴² For I was hungry but you would not feed me...

⁴⁶ These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.”

What will our future be, *the future of us who trust in Jesus as our Saviour?* It will be *being with Jesus* in God’s new Kingdom to come (*John 3:16; 11:25-26; 14:1-6; 1 Thess. 4:13-18*).

Exhortation:

“How then should we face death?” Well, the short answer is: “without fear”, and with a gleeful song of victory. We can cry out as Paul does in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“Where, Death, is your victory?

Where, Death, is your power to hurt (*your sting*)?”

Death gets its power to hurt from sin, and sin gets its power from the Law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!! (*15:55-57*).

If we cling to Jesus as our Saviour, we can cry out like this to death. Death has no fears for us: we are God’s forgiven children through our faith in Jesus as our Saviour, and we know that death is not the end, but simply a sleep from which we will be awakened to be with our Lord.

Knowing this, the poet John Donne, who was a Christian, could write of death:

Death, be not proud, though

some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so...

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more.

Death, thou shalt die (quoted by John Young, 188).

In the meantime, let’s live out our life doing what we emphasised last week:

- * **Striving to be more and more like Jesus in all our dealings with others, to be more and more Christ-like: to love like Jesus, to care for the needy as Jesus did, and to fight for justice**
- * **Spending time encouraging one another**
- * **Sharing the Good News with those around us.**

Conclusion:

Let's finish up. Can I finish up by reminding you of what happened at the funeral of Winston Churchill at St. Paul's Cathedral in London.... Something similar happened at the funeral of the late Queen Elizabeth, but no one emphasised it all, *at least in my hearing*....

Now I don't know much about Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister, and I don't know a whole lot about whether he was a Christian or not. I can only assume so by what he had done at his own funeral to express his certain hope with regard to the future.

Winston Churchill planned his funeral, apparently, and he asked that after the final benediction in the funeral service, a bugler stationed on the dome of St. Paul's would play "Taps", the universal signal that the day is over. But that wasn't the end....

Churchill didn't leave it at that: he asked that immediately after the playing of "Taps", another bugler placed on the other side of the great dome of St. Paul's Cathedral would play the notes of "Reveille", a tune which signifies the world over that "It's time to get up. It's time to get up!!"

And that's what happened at Churchill's funeral: after the final blessing, one bugler played "Taps" from one side of the great dome of the cathedral, and immediately afterwards another bugler played "Reveille" from the other side of the dome.

At the end of history, the final note will not be "Taps" but it will be "Reveille", as our Lord Jesus comes to awaken us from our sleep of death, or to transform us as the case may be, and takes us home to be with him forever (*Larson, Illustrations, No. 45*).

May God bless each of us as we treasure "the living hope", *the certain hope*, for the future that we have, as God's loved, forgiven children.