

Sunday 25th July 2021
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on John 11:17 – 45
Theme: “Set free from the fear of death”
“Don’t be afraid of death, and live your life to the full!”

Introduction:

I want to speak to you this morning about death and dying. I guess that it’s not a great subject to be talking about when most of us are just wanting to go on enjoying life, and are thinking about our next birthday....

But it’s the topic that Jesus is dealing with and talking about in our Bible reading for today.

So that’s what I would like to talk to you about: death and dying....

Part 1: “...which is everywhere around us”

“We live in a cowardly, death-denying culture”.

That’s what the psychiatrist Scott Peck writes in one of his many books. And I think that he’s right! Sure, the topic of death has been opened up a bit more of late, through the discussion of near-death experiences, the Harry Potter books which basically focus on death, *and have many deaths in them*, but basically talking about death is not exactly the number one topic of conversation in groups, or at parties (*see Appendix One*).

In fact, people these days won’t even say the word “death” or “she died”: they would rather say, “he passed on” *in order to avoid even mentioning “death”* (cf. *Appendix One re “Harry Potter and the teller of truth” by John Carroll, The Australian, July 10/11, ‘21*).

We tend to think that death is something that happens to other people. Ridiculous! But that’s the way we tend to think! “We live in a cowardly, death-denying culture” (*Scott Peck, Further along, p. 52*).

Part of this is because we don’t want to think about our own death, but part of this is because there is a real fear inside most people about what’s going to happen when they die... (*e.g., fear of nothingness, fear of facing God*).

That same psychiatrist that I mentioned before, Scott Peck gives an illustration from his own experience of this fear of death. He writes:

Early in my practice, I was visited by a man who arrived in a state of panic, some three days after his brother-in-law had committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a pistol. This man was so terrified he couldn't even come to my office alone.

He had to come with his wife holding his hand. He sat down and began rambling: "You know, my brother-in-law, he shot himself in the head. I mean he had this pistol, and I mean all it took was just this, I mean just an ounce of pressure and he's dead now. I mean that was all it took. And if I had a gun, I mean I don't have a gun, but if I had a gun and I wanted to kill myself, I mean all it would take would just be – I mean I don't want to kill myself, but I mean – all it – just this much".

As I listened to him, it was clear that what had precipitated his panic was not grief over his brother-in-law's death, but rather that this had put him in touch with his own mortality, and I told him so. He instantly contradicted me. "Oh, I'm not afraid of dying!".

That's when his wife broke in, and she said, "Well, dear, maybe you ought to tell the doctor about the hearses and the funeral parlours". He then proceeded to explain to me that he had a phobia about hearses and funeral parlors – indeed, to such a degree that every day walking to and from work, he would go three blocks out of his way – six blocks each day – just to avoid passing a funeral parlour. Also, whenever a hearse drove by, he had to turn away, or better yet, duck into a doorway, or even better, into a store.

"You really do have quite a fear of death", I said. But he continued to insist, "No, no, no, I'm not afraid of dying. It's just those damn hearses and funeral parlours that bother me" (*Ibid.*, p. 50-51).

Maybe, it's tempting to say: 'Well, sure, we'd expect this sort of fear in a psychiatric patient'.

Yes, well maybe it's an extreme case, but I think that it's the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, so far as the fear of death in people around us is concerned. There is a great fear out there, *and maybe in some of us*, about death and what it will bring.

In the letter to the Hebrews, its writer talks about this fear. He writes: **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 lives because of their fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15).

That's the situation, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, for all of us, *apart from a relationship with God through Jesus*. On our own, *apart from a relationship with God through Jesus*, we would all be enslaved by our terror at the prospect of dying: of becoming no more, or of facing up to God....

One Christian commentator on death and dying has this to say:
Don't believe people if they tell you that they do not fear death. The fear of death grips modern civilization in a vice-like grip, and it is none the less real for being driven underground (M. Green, *Christ is Risen*, p. 79).

Part 2: "...but which is wiped out in Christ"

The startling thing that strikes you, as you read this passage about Jesus and Lazarus, is that Jesus has no fear of death. Let me repeat that because in the face of the widespread fear of death that is everywhere around us, this is mind-boggling: Jesus has absolutely no fear of death. Jesus knows that He who created everything from nothing in the beginning, and who gave us life in the first place, can and will bring the dead back to life.

Listen again to what Jesus says to his disciples about his and their friend Lazarus:

Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up"
(John 11:11).

His disciples misunderstand Jesus and think that he means that Lazarus is only asleep and will get better, but John explains:

Jesus has meant that Lazarus had died, but they thought he meant natural sleep (John 11:13).

Jesus know that *by the power of God* he can awaken Lazarus from his sleep of death, and resuscitate his body. And that's what he does....

John tells us that after they had moved the stone away from its entrance of the tomb, *where Lazarus lay, having been dead for some four days*, Jesus looked up and said:

“I thank you, Father, that you listen to me. I know that you always listen to me, but I say this for the sake of the people here, so that they will believe that you sent me”.

And John tells us:

After Jesus had said this, he called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”. The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave clothes, and with a cloth around his face. “Untie him”, Jesus told them, “and let him go” (*John 11: 41-44*).

By the way, why does Jesus do this? Why does Jesus bring Lazarus back to life, so that he can live a few extra years or so? Out of love and compassion for those who were mourning over Lazarus’ death, yes, but also as a sign that he is indeed “the resurrection and the life”, as he claimed: that *through him*, we will have life with the Father after we die.

Jesus says of himself:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies *physically*, and whoever lives and believes in me will never ever die *spiritually*” (*John 11:25-26; R. Brown, John, p. 434*).

And later on Jesus says about death and dying:

“Don’t be worried and upset. Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am” (*John 14:1-3*).

Jesus had no fear of death. He knew the power of God, and he promises us *who trust in him as our Saviour* that he will come and awaken us from our sleep of death at the Last Day, and take us home to be with him.

Paul echoes this in his letters. Take his letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, for example.

There Paul writes:

What we are teaching you now is the Lord’s teaching: we who are alive on the day the Lord comes will not go ahead of those who have died. There will be the shout of command, the archangel’s voice, the sound of the Lord’s trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven.

Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first; then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:15-17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:12, 20, 42-44, 51-57; Phil. 3:21).

When Jesus comes again, he will awaken us, *who are God's forgiven children through our faith in Jesus as our Saviour*, from our sleep of death, give us new resurrection bodies like his, and take us home to be with him forever in the wonderful new Kingdom that God has planned for us.

Jesus had no fear of death, and neither should we who are his brothers and sisters in God's family, *through our baptism and our faith in Jesus as our Saviour*. Our death will be just a sleep, from which our Lord Jesus will awaken us. The resuscitation of Lazarus from the dead is a pointer to this. But a far greater pointer is the resurrection of Jesus himself from the dead.

As Paul writes:

The truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised, literally," the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20).

Jesus' resurrection is "the first fruits" the wonderful resurrection harvest to come. It is the guarantee of our resurrection.

So we have no need to be afraid of death, as people around us are. Sure, we may be a little fearful about the way in which we may die, but we have no need to be afraid of death itself. We have been set free from that fear!! (Heb. 2:15). We have been set free to love, to "really and truly live" (cf. John 10:10; 13:34-35).

Conclusion:

Thank God for this freedom that we have! It's wonderful to be free from the stranglehold of death, free to love!!!

Appendix One:

The following are quotes from an article in *The Australian* by John Carroll entitled "Harry Potter & the teller of truth":

*So what is this story about? Progressing through its seven-volume series, it narrows steadily, inexorably down towards a climactic focus on one surprising subject: death. **Dead shadows the third book, and thereafter steadily turns into the all-encompassing preoccupation....**

There are further direct and substantive conclusions to be drawn from Harry Potter. First and foremost: death is the primary human experience....

***Rowling has revisited the New Testament, adapted it, and brought it alive for very different times, one to which it has demonstrated a singular capacity to communicate. Her Messiah does save the world, taking on its sins, its weaknesses, and its errors. He releases it from evil, allowing its inhabitants to live freely and happily. The lights are switched back on (*The Australian*, 10-11, '21).**

