

## THE LAST ENEMY

Recently I was reading about Shackleton's Antarctic expedition of 1914 and the amazing feats of endurance he and his crew demonstrated. It's a story that reminded me how powerful is our instinct to survive. We don't want to die and profoundly resist the idea of it. Sometimes, of course, this resistance can go over the top. There are those people who have their bodies cryogenically frozen in the hope that they will be resuscitated some time in the future, and recently people have been speculating about eternal life in cyberspace, if you can think of anything worse. Just a few weeks ago, dietary experts were announcing that if we want to live longer, it's not just five units a day of fruit and veg we need to consume, but ten! - a small indication of just how much of contemporary culture is driven by the desire to prolong our lives. So when St Paul tells us that death is "our enemy", perhaps he is on to something. Perhaps our fear of death signifies our reluctance to acknowledge our human fallibilities, our unwillingness to let go and change, our desire for self-preservation.

Paul nowhere says that we shall live for ever. What he does say is that we shall die and that we shall be raised as Jesus was raised. Forget cryogenics, cyberspace and healthy diets; we believe we are going to live again because God has acted to raise Christ from the dead. We need to put to death our unwillingness to die, because this is a sign that we are scared to acknowledge our human limitations, a fear that is at the root of all those selfish attitudes that so harm us. We are at our best when we try to make sense of our human limitations, of the accidents that are always going to happen in this life, and accept the fact that we are going to change in all sorts of ways as time passes and we get older. We are at our worst when we find ourselves looking for someone to blame, when we strive to control our own and other people's lives, and when we struggle to maintain the illusion that we are invulnerable to time and change.

It's not just you and I who can be trapped by these fears. It's also society as a whole. Take the way newspapers project blame on to people of different faiths and cultures in order to avoid having to face our current anxieties. Or look at the way we persist in the illusion that technology will solve our environmental problems so that we won't have to face the awkward fact that we might actually have to change our lifestyles. Or the way we find it so hard to acknowledge that however effective our protection

against the dangers of violence and terrorism, we can never be completely secure. These are symptoms of our reluctance to be open to a future we can't control, our unwillingness to face up to the reality of death.

What St Paul is telling us is this: If you expect that your life will always be protected and that your comfort zone will never be challenged - if you imagine that you will never have to face up to the reality of being mortal and limited - God help you. It's a recipe for disillusionment and the death of the soul. But the good news is that we don't have to live by self-defence and self-protection but can open ourselves up to a world of new possibilities that God has made available to us.

That's what Easter reveals. The resurrection of Jesus shows that our future need not be closed and limited, full of anxiety and fear, but can be gloriously open and alive. We are promised that if we begin to live in a way that responds to God's resurrection promise, living in trust and generosity, we need not be imprisoned by the fear of death. We can begin to live the kind of life that can cope with death because we are learning to look for God's gift at every point as we travel through our life's journey. We face the reality our own death knowing that his promise has been given, but without necessarily knowing the details of just how this promise will be honoured. What we do know is that our present life has the same relation to the future as the seed has to the full-grown plant. Not just survival, but growth into an unimaginably greater dimension.

So the good news of Jesus' resurrection is not that it somehow proves that there is life after death in a general sort of way. What it reveals is that God keeps his promises. In the same way that Jesus' life is restored on the far side of the cross, and that life both is and isn't the ordinary physical life Jesus had in Galilee, so we too can count on the utter faithfulness of God to gift us life beyond our own death. The way we live now needs to be consistent with this future hope.

St Paul describes death as an enemy because death seems to challenge the idea of an eternally faithful God. It looks as though death means that our relation to God comes to a halt, as if God eventually treats us as disposable. But once we recognize that Jesus' resurrection reveals God's faithfulness, we can face death differently – not

because it has stopped mattering or even hurting, not because we have assurance that we shall carry on as before (we shan't), but because God has shown that he has not finished with us. He has more to give us, and he will create the conditions that will make it possible for us to receive.

There's a lot of anxiety about at the moment, the contemporary symptoms of the fear of death that St Paul is talking about. There are the continuing conflicts in the Middle East, with the life-denying and destructive forces unleashed by Isis that are affecting so many. There are the continuing effects of globalisation, with all that this means in terms of a world growing ever smaller, ever more inter-dependent. There are the anxieties aroused by the new leadership in the United States, and nearer home the continuing uncertainties associated with Brexit. And then of course, the increasing effects of financial stringency on our education, health and welfare services. All these contribute to a pervading sense of uncertainty and unease about the future. Many people feel impotent, resentful and afraid. But we shall not find life and peace by giving way to anxiety and refusing to let go of our precious, protected selves. Easter proclaims to individuals and economic systems and governments alike that the future is in God's hands. This is God's world, and we are redeemed. Renewal is possible. Hope is a reality. We are called to challenge our own fears and the fears of our time in the name of the Risen Christ - who has overcome death and promises us the possibility of lives lived in confidence in God's future.

Death will be the last enemy to be overcome, says St Paul. The former Archbishop, Rowan Williams, expresses it beautifully: "At the end of everything, death will be behind us, death will be history. We shall become what we have become because we have lived with death and have learned how to love realistically and humbly, within the compass of a limited life. Death the enemy of our confidence will have become a friend to us after all – an enemy we learn to love, as Christ taught us to love our enemies – and at the end of everything its work is done. What remains is only growth in love, as we stand with Christ and in Christ, looking into the inexhaustible depths of God's reality".

So in the face of all our anxieties and fears, let us let go with Christ, die into his love, and rise with him, opening ourselves to the eternal gift of God's grace.

Let us pray:

Lord of all life and power

Who through the mighty resurrection of your Son, overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him:

Grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ, may reign with him in glory;

To whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be praise and glory and might, now and in all eternity. Amen.