

“What Is Our Hope In Life & Death?”

25 April 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: There Is A Redeemer

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 7:54-8:3

Sermon:

Recently I have noticed that when I read or hear about variants of Covid, I get a heart-sinking feeling and I feel afraid - fear of having to start these restrictions all over again, fear of death. So instead of moving into Ch. 8 of Acts and looking at the life of Philip, I sense it would be good to pause and reflect about death and learn what we can from Stephen's death in Ch. 7:54ff.

I. Fear of death

Every day, we hear Ireland's death statistics. Approximately 5000 people have deaths linked to the virus. Across the world, the number of dead is greater than 3.1 million; this is a sad tragedy and it brings much grief and anxiety, because death is final and separates us from those we love. The coronavirus pandemic and its association with death, along with the uncertainty of its impact on our lives, has increased our awareness of the possibility of death and introduced a fear of death. Winston Churchill said, *“any man who is not afraid of death is a liar”*, and there is within all of us some degree of death anxiety - fear of variants, fear of the uncertain future, fear of death!

II. Responses to death

What should we do to understand and face this universal reality of death? Firstly, we should be encouraged to acknowledge the reality of death and our fear of it and talk about it. However, that isn't usually what we do!

Denial: The author Colm Tobin, having survived a cancer diagnosis and treatment, is quoted as saying, *“I don't think I learned anything at all from it. I just came out the other side. I'm glad it was over.”* He admits to not thinking about death or trying to understand what it would mean, of making no preparation for death, though it was obviously a real and difficult experience for him. It appeared imminent and involved issues important to meaning and existence. His admission of denial is common.

Distract: Another way to avoid death and the harsh realities of life is to distract ourselves. In the pandemic, we have increased online shopping (naturally enough), our consumption of entertainment, even those of us who are disciplined enough, watching TV, Netflix series, etc. (my fix had been Heartland which has 14 series with 18 episodes in each; we are at season 11), and our consumption of alcohol. The headline figure from last week's Health Research Board was that every adult in Ireland drank the equivalent of 40 one-litre bottles of Vodka. As Brenda Power said in her Sunday Times article, *“who drank all my Vodka?”* It is a staggering figure. A recent survey of alcohol consumption in Ireland conducted by the Drink-Aware body showed:

- One in four say they are drinking more since Covid-19.
- Frequency has increased – 14% drink four or more times each week in the past 30 days.
- The main reason for drinking is to relax and unwind as tensions have increased in almost half (47%) of households.

I realise that it is not simply because of a fear of death that all these things are happening, but is part of a human and cultural response to difficulty to distract ourselves in a variety of ways.

Survival: The last bullet point on the alcohol survey was that 25% of adults are drinking less and 31% have made positive changes to their drinking habits during lockdown, which leads us to the next response, survival. In a classic fight or flight response, we want to be safe and survive; so, we wear masks, wash our hands, keep our distance, and get vaccinated. We change behaviour; some of us have lost weight and exercised a great deal more. Undoubtedly, people are aware of leaving a legacy or memory and they are more humble and grateful for all they have at the present time. Many will have changed their beliefs and sought to understand how to live with the reality of death.

As I read an article in the Washington Post about the topic of death anxiety in Covid, I came across this quote from a social psychologist called Sheldon Solomon (an intriguing name). He said, *“I am an infinitesimal speck of carbon-based dust born in a time and place not of my choosing here for an incredibly brief amount of time before my atoms are scattered back into the cosmos. That need not be a terrifying thought.”*

Perhaps it need not be a terrifying thought, but it is not hopeful. As Christians, we believe this perspective is wrong, because it fails to acknowledge that we are created by God with eternal spirits or souls and will give account to God after death. Stephen’s hope and understanding of Jesus, and the Bible’s overall teaching on death, is seen in his words and example as he faced death at the hands of an angry mob of men who were about to stone him to death for his beliefs. Those beliefs and his hope in death are based on the fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and His being alive and in heaven.

III. The Christian view of death

What does Stephen’s death teach us about the Christian view of death?

Heaven, the glory of God and the risen Jesus: The previous quote, from Dr Solomon holds a secular view of humanity as merely animal, made up of atoms and without spirit or soul. Stephen’s faith and experience of God is fundamentally different. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit (v.55), the third person of God; he is enabled to see beyond the earthly reality of sky and space and see the glory of God. Stephen calls God “the God of glory” (7:2), and now he sees the glory of God. The glory of God is a way of describing the presence of God; glory is good and includes perfection, ability, and beauty. The Bible uses concepts of light and darkness, fire and earthquake, gold and precious jewels to illustrate the glory of God. God’s glory has an effect on humanity: all of us reflect the glory of God, all of us have some good and beauty and understanding of the spirit and eternity in our created being. The doctrine of humanity from a Christian view tells us we are glorious, created in God’s image with an eternal spirit. Our value is so much more than the sum parts of our chemical constitution.

Stephen viewed and experienced the glory of God. Stephen had the presence of the Holy Spirit, he was made in the image of God and he reflected the glory of God. At this moment, it was seen in his face (remember Stephen's face described in 6:15 - "like an angel".) Stephen also sees Jesus, whom he describes as the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God. Jesus is described in the Bible as an historical person who was born in Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth and had a ministry in Palestine. He died on a Roman cross, was buried in the tomb of a known Jewish leader named Joseph of Arimathea, and many witnessed His resurrection over a period of forty days. His closest disciples saw Him ascend into the sky, into heaven. It is this Jesus that is seen by Stephen. Jesus is alive in heaven; He has defeated death. *"Death has been swallowed up in victory... but thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1st Corinthian 15:54-57).

Welcomed by Jesus: the Son of man is usually depicted as sitting (2:34), but here He is standing. Most believe this is Stephen being welcomed by Jesus into the presence of God after death. Stephen relates this vision to his attackers in his last attempt to get them to see the truth of Jesus and His deep desire to welcome all who trust in Him into the presence of the Triune God with open arms. This is the end (telos) of the Christian faith. The Bible starts with a world where God and humanity, male and female, are in relationship; and though destroyed by sin, God's purpose, His heart towards us, has been to redeem and restore through Jesus' death and resurrection everything that was lost. The final picture in the Bible is of a Bridegroom welcoming His bride to an everlasting feast and life together in His perfect, created world. This is the end; Christian faith has proof of it in the resurrection of Jesus, and this is the confirmation Stephen sees in his vision of the Lord Jesus standing in heaven to welcome him.

(Our Spirits are) Received by Jesus: Any serious thought of death will include the question, *"What actually happens to us when we die?"* The Bible is clear that those who believe in Jesus have one destination, named heaven, and those who do not believe in Jesus have another destination, named hell. Stephen is "looking up to heaven" (v.55); he "sees heaven opened" (v.56) and he prays, "Lord Jesus receive my Spirit" (v.59). When Stephen says receive "my spirit", he believes in the biblical view of humanity as body and soul, that eternal reality within each human being. So when Stephen dies, his body is buried (8:2) and decays in the ground and his spirit (soul) - literally "the spirit of me" - is received by Jesus in heaven.

Listen to this statement of what the PCI believes about this moment of our death, as taken from the Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 32: *"after death the bodies of human beings decompose and return to dust (Gen 3:19; Acts 13:36). But their souls, which do not die or sleep, have immortal existence and immediately return to God who created them (Luke 23:43; Ecclesiastes 12:7). The souls of the righteous are then perfected in holiness and are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory and wait for the full redemption of their bodies"* (Hebrews 12:23; 2nd Corinthians 5:1). Our bodies decay, while our spirits (souls) go to heaven are perfected and await the coming of Jesus. Those who die in the Lord Jesus are in heaven.

Also note that after Stephen prayed his final prayer of forgiveness for those who were about to murder him, Luke tells us, *"he fell asleep"* (v.60). Falling asleep is a biblical way of describing death, because it is a picture of a temporary, reversible state. We fall asleep in a moment and wake up some time later, unaware of what has happened in the time of our sleep. Stephen dies painfully and cruelly on earth, but he goes to Jesus. He sleeps in death,

he wakes alive, welcomed into the presence of Jesus in heaven. Christian believers who die in the Lord are raised with him to eternal life.

The truth of this reality and experience was illustrated to me as a trainee minister. It was 3 am, and I was called to a hospice to talk to a lady with terminal cancer who could not sleep, due to anxiety about her impending death. For me, it was a big moment because of the seriousness of the situation and the reality for the lady, but also because I was inexperienced and unsure of what to do. I had just left my previous training as a doctor, and in that capacity would have most likely briefly spoken to her and prescribed some type of sedation. We talked about Jesus and the hope we have in Him in death, and as we shared about that hope, she experienced a lessening of her anxiety, reassured by the truth of the gospel, and fell asleep before I left.

Death is such a serious reality for us; it will cause us anxiety, even for those of us who have faith. However, because of Jesus' resurrection and the power of God to bring those united to Him by faith to heaven, we have hope and can have hope that death is a falling asleep, for we will wake in Jesus' presence surrounded by His glory and love and those of faith who have died in Jesus before us. This is the hope of the Christian faith. Let us talk and discuss the implication of this in dealing with the fear of death and of the hope it gives us in life. "I have come that you might have life and have it to the full," said Jesus.

IV. The reality of persecution

The frightening rage unleashed against Stephen spreads to the Church, other Christians in Jerusalem. It is assumed to be led by this group of Jewish men with the consent of the Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin (26:10). A member of particular interest is named Saul. The persecution was intense, violent, and directed more towards the Hellenist Jews, that is supporters of Stephen. (This probably accounts for why the Apostles were left alone, or they may have just decided to stay for the sake of the Church in spite of the danger). There is a systematic attempt, going house to house, to cleanse the city of these Christians, and it included the imprisonment of both men and women. It was, if we imagine, particularly severe and the intent was to destroy the Church. The word used to describe Saul's actions has association with brutality and cruelty. It flared up very quickly, was extremely dangerous for the Church members and they had to escape and get out of Jerusalem to safer places in the surrounding areas and Samaria. Sadly, it is a scene all too common even today, religious persecution and removal of such groups of people from an area or country.

As a result, the people of the Church were scattered into the surrounding areas (v.1) and as they went, they brought the word with them (8:4). The preaching was most likely not formal preaching, but an answer to a question asked in curiosity: "*Why have you come here?*" This allowed them to speak of their faith in Jesus. This was God's way of moving the Church into Judea and Samaria, and sets the scene for Luke to tell us how Philip brought the gospel to others in this region and beyond.

Persecution is inevitable for the Church, but God always is in control and he so moves the church to bring the good news to many more people. This happened in a modern example in 1949 in China. When all foreign Christians were ordered to leave, 637 China Inland Mission missionaries were among them; yet within a few years, 286 had relocated to the surrounding countries in South Asia, and the local Chinese Christians took on the mantle of leading the Church and mission. And the Church has seen a phenomenal growth.

The present pandemic has moved the church onto a digital and global platform, to an even greater extent than it had been before our being forced to do so. Many more people have accessed our services and events, and skills have been learned which we can use to open our eyes to the global world we live in and the opportunities of speaking of Jesus. Some folks are leaving the city to go and live in towns and villages around Ireland; many will take the gospel with them and encourage and strengthen the Church.

Even in persecution, God is sovereign, with us and for us in our present circumstances and difficulties; He uses all things for His glory. The truth of God, His love, His presence, His power over death means that, *“in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:37-39). That was Stephen’s hope and it allowed him to be courageous even in the face of persecution and death. Is it ours?

Praise: Christ Is Mine Forevermore

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: For The Cause

Benediction: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

Discussion & Application:

How do you tend to respond when life is difficult (denial, distraction, survival)?

Stephen made three statements. What do each of these statements reveal about his understanding of death?

What is the Christian hope in death? How can this hope impact the way we live, so that we live life well?