

Sermon on Wednesday 22 April 2020

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Readings: Acts 5. 17-25; John 3 16-17

Before I came to you, I worshipped at my parish church in Welwyn Garden City. The church sits on the main road into the town centre. Built in the 1920s, it has no graveyard, to the joy of its Churchwardens, but there is a smallish patch of lawn used for burial of ashes, with no space for grave markers of any kind.

Then a lovely man called Ed came up with the idea of providing a place for permanent memorials. He was a larger-than-life American who just made things happen. Money was raised and permissions gained for the narrow strip of land which faced onto the main road to be paved and bounded by about 200 granite stones which could be inscribed. Ed died before the memorial garden was finished, but the first stone has his name on it.

The church's east end faces the road, yet unusually it has no window. Instead, a huge metal cross adorns the stark brick wall. So, in the memorial garden, at the base of that wall, three granite gravestone slabs were erected. The outer two have plain crosses on – the crosses belonging to the thieves. The central slab has a Bible verse on it, chosen by the congregation. There was no debate about it – the verse had to be John 3. 16.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."



That verse sums up our faith. God loves us beyond our imagination.

Certainly, beyond our deserving. So, he took action to save us, to set us free. There is no promise here of a perfect earthly life

– instead, we are promised everlasting life. On earth all things must perish – in God's realm different and better rules apply.

It seems we have become a nation obsessed with death. Daily, figures are released on how many people have died as a result of Covid-19 in hospital. There is concern about other nations' figures – rising or falling, accurate or not. There is debate about the hidden numbers of deaths in places other than hospitals. Yesterday it was announced that we have the highest death rate for twenty years – with the majority caused not directly by Covid, but by knock-on effects, such as a reluctance to go to hospital. There is, I suspect, more awareness, even fear, of death than we normally experience.

If we lived in the 19th Century, death would be familiar, because there were so many things that could kill you, and living to an old age was a bonus, not a right. This stands true today in other parts of the world. And, as Geoff pointed out earlier in the week, in Thought for the Day, earlier pandemics have had a far more significant death toll.

But medical advances and long lifespans mean we often lose sight of the fact that this life is a waiting room for the next.

And because our particular version of the waiting room is full of good things and people, we generally don't wish to leave it to move onto something about which we know little. Perhaps we don't truly trust God when he tells us we will see our loved ones again. That we will see Him face-to-face. So, we prefer to cling on to what we have.

How much more terrifying must be this situation for those of no clear faith, with only a vague hope in God.

I think the Church of England has generally responded well to the current crisis. Christians all over the land have leapt into new ways of sustaining contact. This has mainly, and quite rightly, been about keeping things in this life as good as they can be. Combating loneliness, delivering provisions, providing worship and prayer. We are called to live Christ-like lives, and Christians, and others, too, have stepped up to this calling.

But should the church also put some effort into trying to explain the probably foreign concept that we do not believe physical death is the end? That far from being a disaster for the individual, death is a release, a freeing, as they enter into the next world. God's true kingdom is full of all the joyful and wonderful things we are familiar with, but a whole lot better. This everlasting life is without tears or pain or fear; without boredom or anxiety or hunger. In this life, everyone is loved and

valued equally and all good things, and only good things, are possible.

Should we talk about death more? Should we talk about everlasting life and resurrection more?

Surely, we need to tell people about God's promise of everlasting life. It is absolutely fitting that those words from John are the only words to adorn the front of my old church. We need to carve them on our hearts. We need to memorise them and repeat them, because we need to remember, always, that Jesus died so that we might have eternal life. He lived to show us how to live. He rose again to show us death had been defeated.

I don't know how we go about telling people that news. Obviously, no-one thinks it a good thing that people have lost loved ones. Each death represents an individual who is sadly with us no more. We need to offer to help people grieve their loss. But we also need to tell them, if we can, that they do not need to grieve for the lost – because the lost have been well and truly found.

We all will die – it is the ultimate statistic. One out of one living things die. But earthly death is not the end, but a glorious beginning.

How do we know this – because of John 3 verse 16?

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. That whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Amen