

The Christian Attitude to Death

by John Sandys-Wunsch

W.C. Fields once said “The world is a tough place - why a person is lucky to get out of it alive.” Actually we don’t - despite modern scientific medicine the death rate remains pegged at 100%.

So having finished our taxes I thought maybe it would be time to talk about that other inevitable in life, death. I realize this is not always a comfortable subject - every year that passes my own discomfort seems to increase, but it is the gospel that death has been overcome. So as Christians I think we should be able to look at this without flinching.

In the Western world whether people are religious in any sense of the word or not, the subject of death makes us uneasy - we try to ignore it both in our language and our customs and hope that maybe it will go away. We are however interested in beliefs about life after death or even empirical evidence that it happens. We were pleased when recent exploration of ancient sites has shown that Neanderthals - primitive human beings extinct except for some sports fans - buried flowers along with their dead. It is suggested that this means they had some concept of an after-life - or again it could simply mean that Neanderthals invented the florist. Stories about ghosts or the paranormal always seem to help sales of the supermarket tabloids and we tend to be very grateful for anything that might suggest we will be reincarnated into another life after this one ends. Curiously enough in India where belief in reincarnation is widespread, it is seen as anything but reassuring, for an endless cycle of rebirth is a source of horror from which one wishes to be delivered. Nonetheless it is true that the question of life after death has interested human beings for some time now though not all cultures have believed in an after life of any significance.

What then do we find in the Bible?

Most of the Old Testament has no belief in anything resembling a life after death. The general idea was that when you died you went to a place called Sheol – in fact the personified grave. In the King James Version this is translated “Hell”, but Sheol was not a place of punishment – everyone good, bad, and indifferent – went there. Sheol was a dank dismal sort of place where there was nothing interesting or worthwhile you could do, sort of like Qualicum Beach on Sunday night. One of the Psalms says “the dead praise not thee in Sheol” - even worship was not possible.

In a later book of the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel, you do get the notion of the resurrection of the dead - but even here it was not a general resurrection; rather only the very good were raised to get the rewards that they deserved and the very wicked to get the horrible punishments they had avoided in their lifetimes. The average person stayed where he/she was put.

Outside the Protestant Old Testament in the Apocrypha you find evidence that some Jews adopted the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul - in the Wisdom of Solomon there is the glorious passage about “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and there shall no torment touch them.” But you also get a person like Jesus Ben Sirach, another writer found in the Apocrypha, who was a pious devout Jew but quite convinced that there was no life after death. I find it very interesting that it was possible to believe in God and serve him without any thought about a life after this present one is over.

Maybe we have here an illustration of something paradoxical in human existence. The most important things we get in life are only there when we do not look for them directly. Let me give

an example. One of the more enjoyable things is to give presents of some sort to people we like or love. Parents to children and vice versa, spouses to each other, within families or between friends and so on. Yet if the gifts we give were to be seen as the cause of love, then this attitude would destroy the affection we meant to express. If our children love us because we give them presents, then I think we are in trouble - somewhere something has gone terribly wrong. Gifts express love; if they are a condition of love, then love vanishes.

I think then this book of Jesus ben Sirach puts an interesting question to us; is the service of God worthwhile in itself even if we were absolutely sure it did not lead to a sort of gift, namely life after death? Is our love of God based on what we hope to get out of him in the next world? Or is the love of God and the love of other people something we should be ready to give freely without any thought of what we will get out of it? Is the central message of Christianity based on gaining bliss and avoiding punishment in a world to come - or is it based on the worthwhileness of love, service, and worship that are essentially complete in themselves, though they have indeed the additional effect of transcending death?

I am not sure that I have put this question fairly or in the best way, but there have been Christian saints who have said that it is wrong to make one's faith revolve around the presents that await us even as it is wrong to make earthly love in a family or elsewhere revolve around the richness of the gifts we hope to receive.

At all events, there is no doubt that in the New Testament the resurrection of Jesus stands for victory over everything that is evil and destructive in this world - and this includes death. For Paul physical death was the result of sin, so the redemption of humanity from sin was also its redemption from the power of death. Paul usually refused to speculate about the nature of life after death; its certainty in the power of God's love was sufficient for him.

But it is in John's gospel that we find an understanding of life after death that for me at least makes the most sense. In John's Gospel Jesus points out to his disciples that eternal life is something that begins now - that as Christians we are already part of the body of Christ, that the sort of lives we live are already tinged with eternity. The experience of God in our lives here and now is something that cannot be broken by death - God's love is stronger than the death that awaits us all. In other words, life after death is not a sort of extraneous reward divorced from what has been going on - it is the continuation of a process already begun in our everyday lives as the love and concern we have for each other in the church spills out and affects the whole world.

This means that if this world is where our eternal life begins, it is an important part of God's creation and we cannot ignore the importance of what we do here. We cannot cheerfully ignore the problems of the poor and the oppressed and fob them off with "Pie in the sky, by and by" hopes - this was Marx's critique of the Christianity of his day, but the expression he used "Religion is the opiate of the people" was coined by Charles Kingsley an Anglican clergyman for whom this facile attempt to escape from the demands of the service of God was simply unchristian.

This is also why our hope of life after death is seen to be closely connected with our membership in the company of the saints, that is, all those who have been or are or will be servants of God. Immortality does not come as a natural right anchored in our persons; our hope is that bound to God and to others in love through Jesus Christ, we have the assurance that this love cannot be destroyed.

As Christians our hope is that nothing good or loving is ever lost; that God's way of doing things is very different from how we tend to see matters from a human point of view. In God's kingdom what is really important will be revealed. In everyday life here and now love and

kindness do not always prevail, but as we try to live our lives as Christians there are glimpses of God that are only too rare and moments of shared affection which alas are often distorted by our sinful natures. These are the basis for a hope of a life that is stronger than death.

I have in all this said nothing about what a future life might be like - there is a reason. When the German theologian Heinrich Rendtorff was dying, these are the final words he spoke to his wife:

These last nights I have been thinking over and testing everything that we can know and everything that we have been told about what will happen to us when we die. And now I am certain of one: I shall be safe.

There is more in these words "I shall be safe" than in all the pictures one could conjure up; Jesus makes us free for limitless faith in this world and utter confidence in God for the future.