



Is there more to life than this? 4. Is there more to life after death?

John 14:1-6

I come to the final of four addresses which explore the deeper meaning of life. My final address looks at one of the most challenging of all themes – ‘Is there more to life after death?’

I am hesitant about this title for at least two reasons:

- The nature of the theme is deeply personal and many people just don't want to talk about it
- I confess to not having heard many sermons or addresses on the subject and so I have no measure as to how it might be helpful to approach it.

In reality, death is a sure certainty. It was Benjamin Franklin, building on a quotation from Daniel Defoe, who said, ‘Our new Constitution is established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.’

People are reluctant to talk about death; we prefer to leave it to one side. The hospice movement has helped enormously in bringing this theme out into the open and expressing comfort to many.

In past generations there was a closer awareness of the reality of death. It happened so often and in close proximity to people's experience:

- People lived shorter lives
- Conflict and war were present in many people's experience.

Today many adults can reach the age of sixty and have never seen anyone die. It is also true that many avoid contact with bereaved folks until they feel it is sufficiently distant from the event itself. This is predominantly an attitude in the western developed world.

It is, however, important to talk about this because grief and sorrow are two of the major aspects of death to touch us all at some point in our lives.

Every year in Australia well in excess of 150,000 people die in our relatively small population of just less than 25 million. Putting it in crude terms, one person dies every three and a half minutes. We will all become part of these statistics in due course.

There is a need to bring the theme of death from behind its cloak and, as Christian people, approach it in the realm of faith in Jesus Christ.

Sir Walter Raleigh was part of the English nobility during the reign of Elizabeth I. He was a soldier, politician, courtier, spy and explorer. Shortly after the death of Elizabeth, he was charged with treason in relation to a plot against James I. He is believed to have written this poem in the Tower of London on the night before his execution:



'Even such is time, that takes in trust
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with the earth and dust;
Who, in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days,
But from this earth, this grave, this dust,
My God shall raise me up, I trust.'

Preparing for death should be done when we are well. Our confident faith is commended to us in the significant words that Jesus spoke to his disciples:

John 14:2

'In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you.'

In this chapter, Jesus will speak with clarity about believing in God and makes a critical link between the venture of faith which comes as we believe in God and are now called to believe in Christ. One writer suggested that we should go on believing in view of all that the future holds.

Some of us will remember this text and the use of the word 'mansions'. This came into our Bibles from the influence of the Latin. It is not really helpful to interpret this phrase to mean 'western-style accommodation' or 'twenty-first century housing'. William Temple was helpful when he interpreted the word 'room' as a wayside stop for the camel caravans that would sweep across the ancient world.

In the desert, it would feel like the atmosphere of an oasis. For a caravan to arrive late could mean the 'No Vacancy' sign would be displayed. Therefore, someone would be sent ahead to secure the reservation.

This is exactly what Jesus Christ does for us. He goes ahead of us and ensures that our place is secure.

What do we mean by death?

I want to be clear in saying it is not my intention to define death. That is as difficult as talking about when life begins, but I do think we can gain some recognition of what we mean by death.

Death cannot be avoided. It will come. We read Shakespeare from Julius Caesar, 'It seems to me most strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.'

From the wonderful words of Victor Hugo, we find a powerful illustration of Christian truth, 'Death is a thoroughfare, not a blind alley.'

In my own experience, each year when the Methodist Conference meets in the session to remember ministers who have died, a hymn is sung which has a powerful line from Charles Wesley: 'And we expect to die.'

We must not treat death as a huge tragedy, although sometimes it comes in tragic circumstances. Suffering and death are realities. Dame Cicely Saunders, who began the



hospice movement, wrote, 'Suffering is only intolerable when nobody cares and one continually sees that faith in God and his care is made infinitely easier by faith in someone who has shown kindness and sympathy.'

Death and bereavement are priorities in any meaningful ministry, for in these contexts people can receive the assurances of the reality of God's abiding presence, the certainty of his care and the gift of eternal life.

Death is an issue to be faced, and not avoided. Thomas à Kempis concluded that 'For a small living, men run a great way and yet for eternal life, many will scarce move a single foot from the ground.'

Death needs to be liberated from its taboo and placed into a proper Christian context.

What can we say about the afterlife?

If there is a subject that is more of a hot potato than this, then I am not sure what it is. Some people talk about this area with firm confidence; and others not only with uncertainty, but also with a clear sense of 'No thank you!'

George MacDonald's question of long ago is still fascinating, 'Traveller, what lies over the hill?'

There is certainly a great deal of mystery that surrounds death, but I am certain that we are able to say some things to help us in our exploration of life beyond death. We must not find ourselves locked into narrow and restrictive understandings of human identity such as that of Desmond Morris, twentieth century zoologist, who popularly described a human being as 'vertical, hunting, weapon-toting, territorial and brainy 'Naked Ape'. Such a view places the whole of human experience in terms of one of the animals in the zoo!

Our Christian understanding is that we are uniquely children of God and eternity is the context in which life is lived. At the heart of the Christian faith is the promise that death is not the end, and that we will spend eternity with God.

The resurrection of Jesus is a demonstration that God is willing and able to do the same for us – to raise us from death and give us hope of eternity.

Influenced by rationalist thought at the end of the nineteenth century, a lawyer, Frank Morrison, decided to take three years away from his legal practice to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. However, at the end of three years he concluded that the weight of evidence strongly supported the truth of the resurrection. He wrote a book entitled *Who Moved the Stone?* which became a religious classic and is still in print over a hundred years later!

Charles Wesley, in dealing with the matter, simply used the words, 'Where Jesus is 'tis heaven there.' Only God makes the ultimate judgement about this world and about our lives.

Growing older is something that our Christian faith gives us the opportunity of facing positively and yet it doesn't always happen for everyone. I recall talking with someone recently and, as I was thinking about the theme this evening, I asked them, 'When did you first become really aware that you would not live for ever and that you would have to face



the reality of death?' My friend said it was when he was in his early 40s. He was already remarkably successful and yet he started considering life in a different way.

Ageing brings us face to face with issues that are challenging. Two fellows were in conversation and one said, 'Have you ever realised any of your childhood hopes?' His response was, 'Why yes, when my mother used to comb my hair, I often wished I didn't have any.' Within the humour is a profound truth.

The resurrection is the cornerstone on which the whole of Christianity, both in its corporate and individual aspects, is built upon. We can be certain that if it is not true, then everything simply falls apart for the Christian.

Professor C E M Joad was a philosopher at the University of London and a recognisable broadcaster in his day. He was asked whom, of all the past figures in history, he would most like to meet, and further what he would most like to ask him or her. His response was startling. He would most like to meet Jesus Christ and he would want to ask him, 'Did you or did you not rise from the dead?' He recognised how important that question was and is.

In the central section of John's Gospel, Jesus gives a picture of eternal life using the image of a house. Jesus is preparing his close followers for the fact that he is going away – and you can imagine the anxiety they felt.

- Will they be able to follow him and will there be room?
- Jesus had only used the theme of his Father's house once in reference to the temple (John 2:16)
- Jesus is hinting at the thought of a new city, a new world.

In the words of Tom Wright, 'Heaven and earth will meet again when God renews the whole world. At that time there will be room for everyone.'

Jesus overcame death not as a continuation of the old, but as a completely new life. Someone has been through it and come out at the other side, so our understanding of God's resurrection life beyond this world is vitally linked to what has happened to Jesus Christ. At Easter we are bold to sing:

'Made like him, like him we rise.
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.'

Are there certainties we can hold to?

This strikes at the question that underpins these four addresses – 'Is there more to life than this?'

There are many and varied responses to this important theme, but I would like to offer some positive thoughts for all of us.

In 1865 a man called William Branks published a book with the very pious title, Heaven, our Home. A hundred years later a Welsh publisher revised and published it again. George Thomas, the politician who became Speaker in the House of Commons in London, was a Methodist preacher and was invited to write the Foreword. He wrote, 'In recent years, leading clerics have regaled us with accounts of what they do not believe.



With the ardour of children bent on destruction, such thinkers have lent their intellectual gifts to tearing down beliefs that have sustained lesser mortals like ourselves, 'Through all the changing scenes of life'. He was reaching out for some certain confidence.

Over the triple doorway of the great cathedral in Milan there are three inscriptions spanning the central arches. Over one is carved a beautiful wreath of roses and underneath is the legend, 'All that pleases is but for a moment'.

Over another is sculpted a cross, and these words underneath: 'All that troubles is but for a moment.' But above the great central entrance in the main aisle is the inscription, 'That only is important which is eternal.'

C S Lewis concluded, 'I believe in the resurrection in the same way as I believe in the sunrise: because I see it, but more because by it I see everything else.'

We cannot be certain about all the furniture of heaven, any more than we can be certain about the temperature of hell. But I think we can come to some conclusions:

- Faith in Jesus Christ makes sense of the end. Catherine Booth, the wife of William, spoke these final words, 'The waters are rising, but so am I. I am not going under but over. Do not be concerned about dying, go on living well, the dying will be right'
- Faith in Jesus Christ transforms life now. It is sad for a pastor to see someone who has been involved in church activities all their life and yet, when facing the ultimate challenge of death, they find themselves drifting in uncertainty. God transforms our life now
- Faith sees death as the gateway to life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent a letter in his closing days to Bishop George Bell of Chichester. It read, 'This is the end – but for me, it is the beginning.'

David Watson had a remarkable ministry and yet at a relatively young age, on 5 January 1983, he discovered he had terminal cancer. He had been involved in a healing ministry over many years and God had richly blessed him. He wrote a book entitled Fear No Evil. In it he wrote, 'Death for the Christian, it is sometimes said, is like the old family servant who opens the door to welcome the children home. When I die, it is my firm conviction that I shall be more alive than ever.'

I conclude with words from the final book of our New Testament. From the Island of Patmos, we find the words, 'He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared.'
(Revelation 21:4)

There is more to life than survival. When I arrived at Wesley Mission, I agreed to write a personal letter to everyone who reached the age of 100 in our huge family of faith and care. I seem to be writing more and more of these letters each year!

It was Dylan Thomas who gave this advice about facing death:

'Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'



In days gone by, there was nothing to look for, as demonstrated in Hamlet:

'... the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourne
No traveller returns.'

Thank God, a traveller has returned. It is no longer an undiscovered country; death itself has died.