

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH DEATH (1)

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Acts 25:1-12

There has been no escape. The context for our lives is still being set by COVID. The latest mutation of the virus has been a frowning providence from the point of view of being able to return to 'normal' or being able to save more lives. More people are going to die.

That said we are thankful that we are still meeting, despite having been in Tier 4 and now in the latest national lockdown. Caesar has again been caught flat-footed, responding to events, and trying to catch up with a virus that does not announce its plans and intentions beforehand. We are in winter, which makes all the inconveniences of lockdown more acute. This summer and, perhaps with it happier expectations, seems a long way off. In the meantime, the statistics of those dying make for grim reading. Likewise, the estimates of what another lockdown means for other health conditions, for many people's mental health, for educational outcomes of the young, especially those without good access to the internet, and for employment opportunities and general economic welfare overall, make for sobering reading all round. The news about vaccines now becoming available are encouraging but the benefits are still some way off.

An expression which used to be heard more often before, hope rose with the announcement of the new vaccines, was 'learning to live with the virus.' It was used by a number of people, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We can perhaps take this further. There might be a deeper issue we need to think about here which we could term 'learning to live with death.' This captures something of what it means to 'get on with life', as far as possible, while living with the real possibility of death, whether from COVID or from anything else. We might ask how well a largely unbelieving society, such as we find in the UK and most of the West, is doing at learning to live with death. It is also to be asked of the church in the West as to how well it has learnt to live with death. This is something we will be looking at over the next two Sunday mornings. In looking at this subject, we will ask ourselves such questions as 'Have we promised ourselves too much in this life?' or, putting it slightly differently, 'Have we been promised too much?' We often find ourselves saying that we are trying to manage expectations. Is this perhaps an area that is ripe for review and where we have to manage expectations about how long life 'should' be?

These thoughts are provisional. We are all of us, Governments included, having to learn about viruses and what they do; ourselves; about each other; about the evangelical church in the UK; and about wider culture. We are ever learning and our reflections and responses, as we go through time, should ever be adjusting.

1. An apostle speaks

The passage we have before us is the apostle Paul speaking to the Roman Governor, Festus, and those assembled to hear the case that is against him. This hearing is taking place in Caesarea and is a further attempt by the Roman authorities to get to the bottom of the crimes that the Jews allege Paul is guilty of.

The Jewish leaders wanted Paul dead because his preaching was disturbing their rule and undermining the hold that they had over the people through their teaching. The message of the Lord Jesus Christ was not a message they welcomed. So they were trying to secure the death of Paul through the Roman legal system. But to achieve this, they had to paint Paul as actually being a threat to the stability and peace of the Roman Empire, and not just a troubler to their religious leadership.

Things in this process had hit a roadblock, as the grounds, on which the Jews were trying to get Paul executed, could not be proved (vv7-8). Paul and his preaching were not a threat to Caesar's authority. As for the questions of religion, which were the real basis of the Jew's accusations, these could not be proved either. In any case, these were not subjects that the Roman legal system would take any interest in (vv18-19). But because the Roman authorities in Judea wanted to do a favour for the Jews (v9) they kept Paul in custody, even though they had no grounds for doing so.

Paul memorably wrong-foots them all by appealing to Caesar to make a judgment (v11). But before this, he tells the hearing that he has no objection to dying if he is guilty (v11). He would not argue with it but would be prepared to lose his life. This is quite remarkable. He is very calm and very composed in being able to talk about his own life being taken from him, even if it is injustice that is committed against him.

2. Getting a perspective.

Would we be so calm and confident in speaking about our own death? Or would we be fighting to hang on to life at all costs? Would we be arguing at every turn to hold on to life? Would we be trying to dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem where he was ready to die (Acts 21:12-13)? Paul was seemingly reconciled to death, should it come to him. Would we be? Could we have spoken as Paul did?

On other occasions, we find Paul, and also the apostle Peter, speaking comfortably about death, showing that they were reconciled to the fact of death. We find it in Philippians 1:21-23, where Paul speaks about death as something that would be better than life because he would be with the Lord Jesus. He speaks with great conviction

about the resurrection and the afterlife as something to be welcomed and not to be feared or disputed (1 Corinthians 15:50-57). His conclusion in 1 Corinthians 15:58 is that we should, in effect, 'keep calm and carry on.' Paul is able to reflect very calmly in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 about the prospect of his now imminent execution. Peter is also matter of fact about his soon-to-happen death in 2 Peter 1:12-15. He speaks of his body as a tent which is soon to be put off. By the way he writes, he has 'learnt to live with death'.

It is often said that death is a taboo subject in our culture. This is almost certainly true. Is our culture able to think about death as the apostles do? The answer would most likely be 'No.' Are we able to deal with death like them or have we been influenced by our culture so that we are not thinking biblically?

Next week, the Lord willing, we shall look at some of the factors that have perhaps taken away from us the capacity to 'live with death.'