

DYING IN A COMMUNITY OF THE LIVING

A sermon given at the Mornington and Glenaven Methodist churches on January 30 2011

Last week our service at Mornington was focused on a precious new life, the baptism of a little baby. But even the happiness of that occasion was tinged with grief, for an uncle had died very recently. Birth and death, forever in connection: the two most profound experiences we can have.

So today I want to talk to you about death, and how, as a community of faith, we might respond to that inescapable fact of human existence.

Last year, the death of 29 miners in the flame and gas-choked Pike River mine made our Prime Minister, John Key, unusually eloquent. For him it brought back memories of the early loss of his own father, and the realisation that the father lived on in himself, the son. So too, he assured the nation, the dead men would live on in the loving memories of their families and their grieving community.

Death makes artists of all kinds thoughtful and active in expressing their thoughts and feelings. In the last days of December a local artist constructed a white flood-lit bench in a small garden, where one could look down into a coffin-sized hole in the ground; a kind of little stadium of death, a place for reflecting on the fate waiting for us all.

Death interests us: the deaths of famous people like pop singer Michael Jackson or Princess Diana, reported as obituaries in our daily news or captured for our TV screens: images of solemn burial processions, hedged in by grieving crowds and the usual throng of reporters and photographers. More often the deaths of quite ordinary people—friends, relatives, parents, children. How many of you carefully read through the notices printed at the back of the newspaper every day, to see if someone you know has died?

Death often makes us desperate. Anything, anything but that, we cry. During the waiting time at the Pike River coal mine, before more explosions finally snuffed out any hope for the lives of the trapped men, a prayer from the Greymouth community was widely

circulated, asking New Zealanders all over the country to pray for the miners and their families. It included a particularly desperate appeal for prayers that a 'supernatural event' might occur—the nearest the prayer-maker dared to get to asking for divine intervention. We were asked to pray for a miraculous dissipation of the methane, for a sustained period of good weather to allow helicopters to hover over the mine, for the simple miraculous salvation of all the men.

Sometimes it's like that, even for people who have long ago abandoned any belief in a divine being. God is called upon as the last resort, to intervene directly out of nowhere, to do *something*, to suspend the operation of the laws of nature and simply prevent the inevitable disaster...then is bitterly blamed for failing to stop the tragedy in its tracks.

But however we feel and think about death, the simple fact is that we all draw closer and closer, day by day, to the moment of our own death. We are literally all dying in a community of the living. For older people there is the sad recognition that a friend's memory or mobility is failing, that a relative is fighting for their life in a hospital, that there will be no more Christmas cards from someone overseas; younger people may be shocked by the sudden, unexpected death of one of their friends—who was living hard, as if he or she were bullet-proof against accident or mortal injury.

Often our communities—and not just the Christian community—try to deal with this uncomfortable fact by not talking about the subject at all or by pretending that it just isn't happening. (Think of all those health and cosmetic products that hold out the promise of eternal youth and wrinkle-free beauty.)

But we betray our fascination by avidly attending to so-called news that is often not much more than a police catalogue of death or serious injury. The latest instance of domestic violence, the multiple car smash, the vicious attack on a policeman; the drownings, the fall of a climber, the deaths by knife or gunshot or bomb, by epidemic or by heart attack, in a bedroom fire or methane explosion in a mine...

As if that wasn't enough—and if the events are sufficiently sensational—we focus on international catastrophes, as well as

our own mortality rate: deaths by forest fire, famine, disastrous floods and landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, epidemics, civil and inter-national wars, terrorist attacks, so-called ethnic cleansing...the catalogue is enormous, never-ending. Such events take the headlines in our media—and in our minds.

As Christians, as people of faith, we attend to what is said about death in the ancient records that constitute the Bible. Indeed we listen in funeral services to by now familiar passages from the Bible on that theme. *Genesis*, the *Psalms*, *Ecclesiastes*, and Paul's letters. Listen to what they have to say: 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'. 'As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.' 'Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets, before ever the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it' 'I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height, nor death nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our lord.'

We draw particular comfort and consolation from the life and death story of Jesus. Some of the earliest words attributed to him were read in a moving service for graduating doctors and surgeons and other health workers during the graduation celebrations for Otago University only two months ago: 'I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.' ...'Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also.'

But whatever we see or read or feel or think, the fact of death remains. Death for us and for every living creature on this planet from the tiniest, lowest beings like microbes or bacteria, to the largest, most highly developed forms of existence...like ourselves.

Death will come by what we sometimes call 'natural causes', or (more foolishly) 'acts of God'; death by chance or deliberate injury (which includes everything from the cow munching grass, to the leopard seal taking a penguin, to the terrorist exploding a bomb in the middle of a busy market. Oh yes, and the influenza virus, the cancer, the aneurism, the drunken driver, the insanely jealous husband, the professional killer, the suicide, the death sentence formally pronounced by a judge acting on behalf of the state.

In this respect 2011 will be no different from 2010, though the statistics may shift ever so slightly. It will be no different from the year of the death of Abraham, or Solomon, or Julius Caesar, of Jesus or his parents Mary and Joseph, of Genghis Khan, of Buddha or Mohammed, of Martin Luther King or Ed Hilary or our next door neighbour.

How as people of faith, as a community of faith, might we respond to this harsh fact?

With profound **gratitude** that we have been given our unique share, our tiny portion of the sublime energy of Creation, to do with as we will; a little moment of life, that at our death will be surrendered back into the greater life of the cosmos.

With the calm **understanding** that in the grip of **grief and rage, in the name of our humanity**, we will naturally rail against what we properly see as the ultimate enemy to our existence.

With fierce **resistance**, on our own behalf and that of others, bringing every skill, every scientific advance, every instrument of the law, every resource of our own personalities to confront and where possible defeat the advance of that last enemy.

With quiet, wise **acceptance of the inevitable**—and with absolute and determined **faith** that in death, as in life, we are forever held within the loving providence of God, in whom nothing is lost, and from whom we are never separated.

Amen