

Reflection Sunday 10 March. Lent 1

Bible Reading: Matthew 10:26-31

Cecile

Every religion teaches ways of dealing with the death. Every culture has ways of honouring those who have died. Some faiths, such as the Buddhist faith, teach people to really look death in the face. There are specific meditations in Buddhism training people to confront their own death, to imagine their own dying, so that when they die they die well, calm and unafraid, fully aware and accepting of all the stages of letting go.

Western culture is hopeless with death. We want to control everything. Our medical system sees death as defeat and failure, so we hook people up to life support systems and prolong life as much as we possibly can.

My husband Chris was doing some study last year about funerals in the military, and it got him into some fascinating reading about trends in funerals and how people are dealing with death in our society. You might have noticed, but it is increasingly common for the dead person to not actually be invited to their own funeral! People are uncomfortable with the presence of a dead body, it's too morbid to have an actual coffin in the room – so increasingly the body is cremated as soon as possible, so that all that's left for the funeral is a nice neat little box.

I'd like to read to you this morning an excerpt from a book called *'The Good Funeral'*, by Thomas Lynch, a church pastor.

“The contemplation of the existential mysteries, those around being and ceasing to be, is what separates humans from the rest of creation. Our humanity is directly tied to how we respond to mortality. We are defined by how we deal with our dead in their physical reality and how we deal with death as an existential reality.”

Lynch's simple but powerful claim is that we deal with death by dealing with the dead. He is critical of the changes in western culture over the past few decades, which have seen death being handled almost exclusively by paid professionals, and dead bodies being removed from the liturgies of death. This, he claims, “has created an estrangement between the living and the dead that is unique in human history. Curiously, we are rapidly becoming the first society in the history of the world for whom the dead are no longer required – or desired – at their own funerals.”

“Failing to deal authentically with death has something to do with an inability to deal authentically with life.”

“People are as religious as they have ever been, but they have switched religions to one with more vapor and less body. Instead of a religion that discovers the soulfulness in what we do in the flesh, the new religion is one of airy spirituality. It is allergic to institutions and buildings, creeds and structures. And it doesn't like bodies. The real stuff, after all, is spiritual, so the body, with its wrinkles, and its tendency to break down, is a hindrance to the living.

Lynch claims that “people who cannot care for the dead and accompany them to a place of farewell are a people with a diminished ability to care for the living and to join with others in communities of trust and meaning. If we cannot walk with the dead in hope, it is because we have lost our bearings in life. We have become afraid of death”

He claims that only by dealing with death in physical respectful ways can we “love this world even as we hope for the next one.”

Discussion:

When I am reminded that I am a creature, who will one day die, I feel ...

As we begin our journey to the cross through this time of Lent, we begin by touching base with our own physicality and mortality, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Like the little animals that share our home whether we want them or not, our creature-ness shares our life whether we like it or not. Our bodies remind us of our limitations. Our aches and pains, our tiredness and emotions, connect us back to the our createdness as limited, mortal beings.

And yet Jesus affirmed again and again the honour and significance of these mortal limited bodies of ours. He said that God treasures all his creatures, even sparrows, but that we are worth even more. He healed people's bodies, and fed people's bodies. Most significantly of all for our theology of life and death is that God chose to become fully human in Jesus. Paul in his letters was adamant and uncompromising against those who wanted to spiritualise Christ – Jesus was a real man, wrote Paul. He really suffered, he really experienced pain and agony on the cross. He really died. The Christian faith is not all about 'airy spirituality'. It is God with skin on.

Our Lenten study will lead us through these next few weeks into exploring our relationship with the world around us. It begins here, with our own bodies, through which we experience the world, and our own basic identity as created by God. Here is the place where God breathes his Spirit. Here is where God dwells.