



Death: a Christian reflection

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Visit Westminster Abbey and you will find that death is all around you. Christians do not always know it, but they are actually unusual in the way they keep death close at hand. Other faiths do not keep graves in their places of worship. Christians look at death, they think about death and they pray about it. They think death might even have lessons to teach. There are images of skulls and skeletons throughout the Abbey which act as a *Memento Mori*, 'The Remembrance of death'.

Death is natural: animals, plants and humans die. Christian theology, however, will not accept that there is life and then death and nothing else. In fact, Christians think death is actually *un-natural*. In the story told about the creation of the world in Genesis, Adam and Eve were destined for life; they would have gone on living. It is only because they sinned by taking a forbidden apple that they had to face death,

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Genesis 3:19

Death appears as a punishment. You can read more about this in this [reflection on loss](#).

Although most Christians are quite sure that the story about Adam and Eve is just that - a story - the idea that death is not what God intends for us, is a basic belief. Right at the heart of the Christian faith is an absolute commitment to Christ who died on a cross on Good Friday and rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. Jesus' death and resurrection are the central beliefs of Christianity. God defeats death and Christ lives. Christians believe in life, not death.

In theology, death stands for all that has gone wrong for us. It is the wrong ending. We are not supposed to die, we are supposed to live, like Christ. We live, we die and we rise again. So, Christians talk about death (and used to talk about things like *Memento Mori*) as a way of reminding themselves of how things can go wrong. If death was a punishment for sin, then the fact that we will die reminds us that we too are sinners and need forgiveness. Thinking about death, Christians prayed for God's mercy and looked on their own lives critically. Even success, fame and money would not stop them dying. Standing in the Abbey, looking at these memorials, we are given a chance to think about our own lives and how success might lead us astray. These

images make us think about dying and about sin. A priest and poet called John Donne famously explained that idea when he heard a funeral bell ringing and argued that we should the bell reminding us that we all live and all die.

“Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

The point here of course is that Christians believe that sin is what really kills us. A sinner, who has turned away from God might not see, or even refuse to accept, the gift that God gives, the chance to rise from the dead. Quite a lot of Christian writing and thinking over the years has concentrated on the idea that we die wondering whether we will be forgiven. We die knowing that we will be judged by God and may, or may not, go to heaven.

So, death became, for Christians, a very focused moment to think about God’s judgement There is an image of this judgement in the Chapter House. As with many other images of judgement it is dramatic and alarming, and it is *crowded*, everyone is in the business of life and death.

You will find this same idea, in the Bible, in a famous story which Jesus told about God’s judgement when sheep are divided from goats,

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world

Matthew 25:31-34

The idea here, is that those who have lived generously and kindly will live.

In the writings of St Paul you can clearly see the way Christians think about life and death by thinking about Christ who died and then lived. However anxious we might be about dying, it is life that a person of faith should hope for.

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

2 Corinthians 4:8-14

Scripture, in the end, does not fear death because Christ has defeated it. Paul again,

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Corinthians 15:56-57

Prayer

Christians will tell you that it is a mistake to live in the present and think that death is the end. We do not live in the present; we live in a community created by God that includes the living and the dead, with a future in eternity. We must not spend our days at tombs looking for the dead. We are supposed to look for life. Here is a prayer by John Donne,

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity: in the habitations of thy majesty and glory, world without end.