

The Death Experience

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

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Revd Rob Miners

Purely as a sermon aid, on the side glasses of my old beat-up ute and my Holden Caprice, there's a sticker which reads, "Is there life after death? Touch this car and find out."

Usually, I preach on one of the Bible passages of the day, but today I will be speaking generally on the subject of death and dying. My objective is to get you thinking about what the death experience holds for you. I'm not referring to any scriptural passages specifically today, but trust that the whole sermon will be undergirded with scripture.

In the Creed, in a little while, we will say, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Quite a few times in my ministry, I've been asked, "Rob, what's it like to die? What happens?" So: fifteen 15 seconds for you to think about how you would answer such a question. . . .

What's it like to die? My initial but unexpressed reaction was, "Well, I don't know. I've never had the experience. And isn't that true? We've never had the experience. Otherwise, we wouldn't be sitting here this morning listening to this enthralling sermon.

It usually happens once, and we don't get to share the experience. There have been many recordings, however, of people who have died and have been resuscitated and where they have had what is known as an NDE, a near-death experience. I recently finished reading a book written by Molly Cox Chapman, *The Case for Heaven*. The book details the accounts of many people who have experienced NDEs. In the early 80s, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a doctor, wrote a similar book.

Now, some doctors don't believe in NDEs and attribute them to oxygen deprivation. But I thought, as I read the book—and have spoken to people who have had an NDEs—that it's strange that they all experienced very similar things. For example, bright light, a long tunnel emptying into the most beautiful garden they've ever seen, and a person standing there in the most brilliant white robes. They also come back with an absolute, unshakable, conviction that, yes, there is a place called heaven or an afterlife. They also become totally at peace about the dying process, and indeed some of them become rather angry when, through medical intervention, they were brought back. It's only been Kerry Packer, the media mogul, who said after his near-fatal heart attack on the polo field, "Let me tell you, there ain't nothing out there."

Sometimes, when I've spoken with people in nursing homes or at hospital, they've said to me, "I want to die." We talk about that for a while, and sometimes it's because they've endured enough pain. Sometimes they feel that they've lived long enough, and the quality of life just isn't there for them, and medical procedures are the only thing prolonging life. When you talk to people like that, they often say, "I'm not afraid to die," or "I'm not afraid to meet God." Some see it as an experience they're looking forward to, almost with an eager anticipation, not bravado. For some, however, there is a fear of stepping into the unknown.

When we're young, we love adventures. We like to explore different places, to discover fresh scenery and to meet new people. Usually, as the years roll on, we lose something of this love—or knees and hips start grinding. We tend to prefer familiar scenes and to turn to friends and family whom we have grown close to over the years. Death means for us the loss of things that are dear to us, separation from loved ones, friends, the turning away from old familiar scenes. It can be all of this that makes us afraid. It is as though death comes and leads us away from it all, and we have to take a step into the unknown, from which ultimately there is no turning back.

Now, it is here that we find what an enormous difference the Christian faith can make. For the Christian death is not simply a step into the unknown. We shall go to Christ. If he's been a friend of ours in life, he will still be our friend in death. I had a rector when I was but a callow teenager who said quite emphatically in a sermon once, which I've never forgotten, "I know where I'm going when I die." Now, I'm not sure if he did actually tell us where he was going, but I presume he meant that he was going to be with the Lord. At that stage, my spiritual journey was fairly immature, and I pondered on that for many years. How could he be so certain? I mean, it's up to God where we're headed after death. For a long time, I looked on his pronouncement as a bit of spiritual superiority.

And yet, after he died, Mrs Rector was very distressed for many months, and one night he came and stood at the foot of her bed and said, "I'm in a beautiful place. I'm totally happy. I'll be waiting for you." Now, whilst she still missed Arthur terribly, the experience gave her a deep peace.

For many years, I've had the same conviction. I know where I'm going when I die, not because of anything good I've done. You know how God is usually depicted as a white-haired man? Well, I caused most of that in my teenage years. I remember I once gave up wine, women, and song. It was the worst 20 minutes of my life. It's not that because I'm an ordained minister, I'll get a front seat. Although, being a good Anglican, I should get a back seat. And when I take into account my often unloving attitude, the sins that I've committed over the past seventy-five years, I reckon that a seat in the lych gate of heaven will do.

It has all to do with God's grace; God's grace extended to me through my baptism and confirmation, being spiritually uplifted by the sacraments, but chiefly in response to what God did for me on the cross at Calvary, through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, the promises he has made to me and my acceptance of those promises. I can only throw myself on God's mercy and accept in faith those promises. I can't even muster up the faith within myself. Again, my faith is a gift from God.

If we have really tried to do our best with God's help, to be the sort of person that Christ can make us, and to live the kind of life that really does remind people of Christ, simply because there is love and warmth and generosity shown, even ever so palely in death, there is simply nothing of which to be afraid. When death comes, it means that our mortal body has served its purpose and that this body is not now required and dies. Our real self, the living person, comes to Christ.

Sometimes death is spoken of as crossing the river. Many poems have been written on themes of death and passing over to another place. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote *Crossing the Bar*. The poem is one which I have used at funeral services for naval personnel and is particularly appropriate in that context.

Sunset and evening star,
 And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
 When I put out to sea,

 But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
 Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
 Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
 And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
 When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Other poems which of familiar theme of crossing over include "I just stepped into the next room," "A step on the road to home," "The rose still blooms on the other side of the wall," and "Born for resurrection." All of those point to the continuity of our existence but in a different place. And they speak in differing terminology of meeting God, be it expressed as my pilot, my gardener, etc.

The experience of death is something which we will all go through sooner or later and yet there is so often little preparation made spiritually by so many. Sure, we might write a will and do those sorts of things but I'm talking of spiritual preparedness, keeping short accounts with God.

So how have you gone in answering the question I put at the beginning? The question the person in hospital asked. "What's it like to die? When I think of my own demise, I'm more concerned about how I might die not so much as the death experience itself. I don't want to die a slow agonising death.

Knowing my vices and interests probably an old car will fall off a jack and flatten me or I'll die of carbon monoxide poisoning while tuning it one day. Allow me to digress momentarily. I've been reading of some classic headstones and death notices during the week.

First one. "Here lies the body of Sarah, wife of John Hayes who died the 24th of March 1823, aged 42. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Second one. "Sacred to the memory of Major James Brush who was killed by the accidental discharge of a pistol by his orderly, 14th of April 1831. Well done, good and faithful servant."

An old man died, and his wife prepared a death notice for the local newspaper. She spent some time composing the notice and settled on the words "Sam Reid, dead." She submitted the notice to the editor of her local paper for publication in the death notices. The editor told her that the minimum cost for the notice would be a certain amount, and she had room to add more words to the notice if she wished. She thought about it over the weekend and returned on the Monday with the following words, "Sam Reid, dead. White Volvo for sale."

It's strange how sometimes, when you're putting a sermon together, a recollection of an experience that has been forgotten for sixty years surfaces. I guess it's similar in essence to those poems I mentioned earlier and to some it may sound overly simplistic. However, some clergy like me have over-simplistic minds.

When I was a little fellow, probably around the age of seven or eight, my family was on holidays on a farm at Berridale. I'd gone to bed in my little bedroom and, as usual, slept very soundly. But apparently during the night other relatives came and needed to stay over. When I awoke early the next morning, I was on a bed out on the open veranda. I lay there thinking how beautiful the sun was shining on me. How magnificent all the birds of the morning were sounding as they joined in their warbling, calling and crowing. How the colourful flowers in the garden looked so majestic and beautiful.

But underneath all of that were the strong loving arms of the father who had picked me up with gentleness and brought me to another place. Friends, that's how I think my experience of death will be.