

My text is not taken from our lectionary readings this morning but from 3 verses in Hebrews: “We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone... He shared our humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Hebrews 2: 9, 14,15) This gives me as a theme: “Freed from the fear of death”.

It is not very fashionable today to dwell on the martyrdom of the early Christians, but this morning I would like to give you two famous examples of Christians who were set free from the fear of death by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The first is the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, in 156 A.D.

Polycarp was brought before the Roman Proconsul when a mob clamoured for his death, just as Jesus was brought before the Roman Proconsul Pilate when a mob howled for his crucifixion. The Proconsul told Polycarp to say, “Away with the atheists!” That was a common term for the Christians, but it was not specifically a name for Christians, so Polycarp said it. Then the Proconsul told him to curse Christ. Polycarp said, “I have served him for 86 years and he has done me no harm. How can I blaspheme the King who saved me?” The Proconsul said, “Swear by the genius of Caesar. Polycarp replied, “I am a Christian!” The proconsul threatened him with wild beasts, and he said, “Bring them in!” Then he was menaced with fire, to which he replied, “The fire that burns for an hour is not to be compared with the fire of eternal punishment!” And for this he was burned to death.

Clearly he was freed from the fear of death by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

My second example is of Perpetua and Felicitas from just after 200 A.D. in North Africa.

Perpetua was of noble birth, and she had a child at her breast whom she was allowed to suckle in prison. Felicitas was a slave girl in the advanced stage of pregnancy. She was afraid that she would not be able to die with the others, since Rome did not execute pregnant women. There is a moving story of her father coming to visit her in prison and pleading with her to offer a sacrifice to the emperors and so avoid the death penalty, but she refused. All the Christian prisoners prayed with her and for her that she would not be left behind on the road to martyrdom. The pangs of birth came upon her and she cried out in pain. A jailer said to her, “If you cry out at this, what will it be when you are thrown to the beasts?” She replied, “What I suffer now, I suffer, but then another will be in me who will suffer for me, because I am to suffer for him.” She gave birth to a daughter who was taken from her and cared for. She went with the other Christians to their death in the arena.

Perpetua and Felicitas had been freed from the fear of death by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A distinguished church leader in those years, Tertullian, famously said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” And so it proved to be even though the outlook was far from promising at the time. I believe that the same is true in our time. Wherever Christians are being martyred for their faith, in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, or elsewhere, it may look as if the church might be extinguished, I believe that the opposite is true: we shall see a new growth of the church in the years to come. This we can expect and pray for with confidence, The blood of the martyrs is still the seed of the church.

Now let me move on to freedom from fear of death through illness. I will quote from an article by Charles Moore printed in the magazine THE PLOUGH a few years ago (2009).

Plagues mar history. Under Byzantine Emperor Justinian 1, disease-ridden fleas killed 40% of Constantinople's population and a quarter of the region's population. Moore cites a number of plagues in Europe coming down to the Spanish flu of the 20th century, in which an estimated 40 million people were killed, more than were lost in the Great War.

Pagan Rome was completely ill-prepared to help the sick or deal with mass death. In A.D. 165 a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. In all, during the 15-year duration of the epidemic, from a quarter to a third of the empire's population died. Almost a century later, a second terrible epidemic struck the Roman world. In 251 to 266, at the height of what became known as the Plague of Cyprian (the bishop of Carthage), 5,000 people a day were said to be dying in Rome. The basic response of pagans was ...one of flight. Doctors, priests and nobles all fled in droves.... The famous physician Galen, who lived through the first epidemic... got out of Rome as quickly as possible.

In stark contrast to such hopelessness and fear, the Christians showed how their faith made this life, and even death, meaningful. ... Instead of fear and despondency, the earliest Christians expended themselves in works of mercy that simply dumbfounded the pagans... In Rome, the Christians buried not just their own, but also pagans who had died without funds for a proper burial. They also supplied food for 1,500 poor on a daily basis. In Antioch in Syria, the number of destitute persons being fed by the church had reached 3,000. During the plague in Alexandria, when nearly everyone else fled, the early Christians risked their lives for one another by simple deeds of washing the sick, offering water and food, and consoling the dying. The first Christians not only took care of their own, but also reached out far beyond themselves... Their elementary nursing greatly reduced mortality. Simple provision of food and water allowed the sick that were temporarily too weak to cope for themselves to recover instead of perishing miserably.

Pagans could not help but notice that Christians not only found the strength to risk death, but through their care for one another they were much less likely to die. Christian survivors of the plague became immune, and therefore they were able to pass among the afflicted with seeming invulnerability. In fact, those most active in nursing the sick were the very ones who had already contracted the disease very early on but who were also cared for by their brothers and sisters. The people of the Roman Empire were forced to admire their works and dedication. "Look how they love one another!" was heard on the streets.

I submit that the early Christians who risked their lives to serve the sick and the poor and the aged and the dying were showing that they had been set free from the fear of death by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let me come now to our own time.

We have all read about or seen on the TV news of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. We all admire the volunteer doctors and nurses and others who have risked their lives to go and help put an end to this terrible epidemic. We have not been told what motivates them all, but I trust that amongst those courageous volunteers there are Christians, who have been set free from fear of death by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. On Good Friday on Radio 4 at 3 p.m. Dr. Natalie McDermott gave a meditation on the crucifixion, bringing in the story of the village Eyam in Derbyshire where the plague took hold 350 years ago, and the villagers agreed not to flee

the village to escape the plague and perhaps spread it, but to remain in the village and contain the plague there, at the cost of their own lives. They had been set free from the fear of death.

We have all heard and seen news of the terrible air crash in the Swiss Alps. Relatives of the crash victims were offered the chance to visit the crash site. Some refused to travel by plane, for understandable reasons. But the fear of death by plane crash ought not to afflict Christians! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has set us free from the fear of death!

Some people are terrified of cancer. Naming cancer triggers panic. Nowadays it is often possible for cancer to be cured by drugs and chemo-therapy and radio-therapy. So a diagnosis of cancer is not necessarily a death sentence. In any case, we all have to die one day. And for Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has freed us from the fear of death.

Is that true for you? So how are we to think about death? Does it frighten you?

I am at an age when I have seen two brothers die, and a sister-in-law, and a brother in a care home suffering from Parkinson's Disease and Dementia, so I have had to face the prospect of his death in the next year or two, and then it will be my turn. Molly and I recognise that we should be moving to a smaller house. And we need to update our wills. But what about death itself?

I confess that I am not so bothered about the fact of death. What worries me is the prospect of becoming too weak to cope with the business of living. I dread dementia more than cancer. I don't want to become a burden on loved ones. And I guess that would be true for many of you. It is not the fact of death but the process of dying which is daunting. Christians in the past have spoken about making a "good death". Do we talk about that anymore? I think the hospice movement has helped many people to make a good death: with time to think about what to do with possessions, and whether there is unfinished business to do, mending relationships that have gone wrong, or saying things that need to be said while there is still time to say them.

What has this sermon said to me as I have prepared it?

It has said these things at least.

Death is not the calamity that many people think it to be. Jesus, by his death and resurrection has shown that death is not the final curtain on life. Beyond the curtain of death there is life. We cannot fully understand it; we know that there will be judgment in it, one way or another, but the grace of God seen in Jesus assures me that judgment will be merciful. And that life will make it possible to see again loved ones who have gone before. In this world I have greatly enjoyed singing, and I am sure that there will be singing in heaven, great and glorious singing. And the heart of that life will be living where Jesus is and sharing in his purposes of salvation for this world. The church has taught that Jesus will come again to complete his task of bringing the Kingdom of God from heaven to earth, and I believe that we shall have a part in that great project. How and where and when is a great mystery to me, but I hold on to it with faith and hope and love.

I hope I have said enough to set you thinking, and maybe enough to set you talking with those near and dear to you about the subject of death, which we usually do our best to avoid.

I conclude with the words of the letter of Jude: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God and Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen.