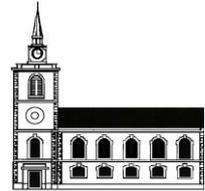


Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

The Revd Hugh Valentine

1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7.11-17



Don't worry dear, we'll get you another

Some of you have heard me before lament the lottery of the lectionary. The preacher is meant, generally, to preach on the appointed texts and to use them to expound the Gospel. Sometimes that works a treat: a rich reading or some unexpected detail puts a breeze under the preacher's pen. But not always, and not (I think) today.

Still, I was struck by the coincidence of the theme of today's Old Testament reading with that of the Gospel (and am grateful to Emma for reading it instead of Galatians that is listed in the service sheet).

Each is about the raising of the apparently dead. Luke's account of Jesus raising the widow's son at Nain is tightly and unambiguously written. The reading from 1 Kings raises some complications about God's displeasure and the interventions of holy people in returning the dead to life.

Strange, don't you think? These two stories on the same day. A theme common to each is very serious, and sensitive: that of a mother witnessing the death of her child, surely one of the most dreadful experiences (and one known to some here). Another theme is that of the miraculous - if taken at face value, as some Christians do. Whether scripture is to be read as word-for-word true or as a metaphorical way of conveying meaning is something we have often explored. I don't think we need explore that again now (though I am happy to be engaged on the subject later).

An unavoidable theme then today is death. That too gets explored quite often here. As it should.

My first experience of death was that of my budgie, Billy. His funeral was a solemn affair involving a small cross made of two lolly-pop sticks. I was, of course inconsolable, as any six year old is entitled to be on first acquaintance with this disturbing mystery of life ending and bodies, once animated, falling silent and still.

My parents dealt with my incoherent distress by saying 'never mind, dear, we'll get you another'. And so they did, with in hindsight excessive haste, later that same day. Similar experiences followed, involving next the goldfish and later (-rather exotic for an English Midlands mining town, I know-) a chipmunk. What I associate with these memories is the well intentioned consolation: 'but don't worry dear, we'll get you another'.

My first acquaintance with the death of a person rather than a pet was that of my often grumpy and emotionally inaccessible Scots grandfather. He simply stopped appearing in his usual chair one morning. I was not told for some time that he had died. No one thought to use the opportunity to explain this death thing, or to take me to the funeral. Mercifully no-one said of him 'don't worry dear, we'll get you another'.

You will have heard the cliché that 'death is the last taboo'. I've never found that entirely convincing. Death is talked about far more these days. Life threatening conditions are no longer mentioned only in hushed oblique ways. But we still have a great deal of learning to do in this sphere.

An opportunity never to be evaded if it offers itself is to experience the death of another person: to be with them in their

final hours; to keep watch with and over them; to be attentive and tender. Attentive not only to them but also to ourselves.

Some of us have specific visual memories that remain accessible throughout our lives: some comforting, some quirky, often some that are painful and make us wince. I mention this because of one I have that is quirky but always instructive (at least I find it so). In my mind's eye I see, in all its detail, a 'bus ticket common from my childhood. Underneath the date and price it carried the legend: *not transferable*. I value it – it's an icon of sorts. What it shows me is that every one of our experiences - and how we interpret them - are unique. I know that 'unique' is an overused word but here it applies.

Our experiences simply cannot be transferred or made available to others in any full way. It belongs only to you. You can describe it to others, and their empathy may carry them into a deep understanding of how you feel, but the experience remains yours alone. *It is not transferable*. And when we are in the grip of grief – or other shock or trauma - part of the sting and anguish is that we know that the experience is uniquely ours and cannot be shared or fully communicated however much we try. We are alone with it. Sometimes we are *lonely* with it. The same is true I think of the end of a love affair or a friendship (each of which can also be a kind of death).

Does a serious taboo remain around death? I'm not sure the answer is quite straightforward. For which of us, when sitting back and taking time to think carefully, does not see a world not only choosing what leads to death but practising it with abandon? The First World feeds its face on the sweat of the Third; we pig-out

on the limited resources of the planet behaving as though it were a gravy-train without end; world governments spend over \$1.7 trillion dollars a year on arms and weaponry [2015]; we idolise the poisonous divinities of constant growth, of must-have consumption, and we fuel hatred, in so many subtle ways, of others – other groups, other cultures, other people. This certainly has the appearance of an idolatry of and with death.

You may know the Old Testament injunction: *'I call on heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Therefore, choose life'*. [Deuteronomy 30:19] It seems pretty clear that as a species we choose death. Lustful for imagined security and comfort we do things to ourselves, one another, other peoples, other places, to other forms of life, to this planet and to God which really, when you stop and think, are deadly. We seem never to see this.

Perhaps the taboo we have is not with death but with life. Is our true nervousness perhaps more to do with the risk of *being raised to life*? Is it possible, do you think, that part of our malady, part of our sickness, part of our ambiguous relationship towards death is not death itself but our fear of discovering what it is to be fully alive?

Our lives are not transferable. We have one precious life as embodied forms on this astonishing planet. There is no 'don't worry dear, we'll get you another'. Whether there is life *after* death is a question we may ponder. Whether there should be life *before* death shouldn't require much thought. The greater question for each of us might be about the kind of life we should live *before* we die. Amen