

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 14 March 2021

*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Help us now to hear and obey what you say to us today. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

### ***From Death to life***

How do we define death and life? In 2014, there was a survey that asked 500 adults aged over 50 from across the UK which condition they feared the most. Overall, 68% said dementia and 9.44% said cancer. Just 3.88% said they were frightened about getting a heart condition and 0.73% were concerned about developing diabetes.<sup>1</sup> According to statistics in the same period, there were around 800,000 people with dementia in the UK, and the figure was expected to soar continually. The survey revealed that people feared for having dementia as it could bring a profound impact on both the person as well as the wider family. That is, their health condition may disrupt their relationship with the family. We want to have loving and supportive relationships with any other people, and the first and foremost group is our families. Among diseases and illness, dementia may highly likely affect a relationship with family not to mention losing the self-control. Indeed, maintaining a loving relationship with others is one of things that make us human beings. The same principle applies to death and life in relationship with God too.

#### ***1. From death to life in Ephesians 2:1-10***

In general, death may be the end of any relationship. When a person stops breathing and there are no vital signs in the body, we may call her/him dead. The bodies would be quickly moved to a mortuary, and a funeral may be arranged. It is also the end of a relationship with the family and friends even though the memories of the deceased may continue to live. But biblical concepts of death and life do not depend on our physical vitality but a relationship with God. In Ephesians 2:1-10, death and life are identified either our relationship with the principles of the world or with God. In verses 2:1-3, three images describe humanity's helpless state: the corpse<sup>2</sup>, the slave,<sup>3</sup> and the condemned prisoner.<sup>4</sup> Any of these doesn't seem to be a good

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nursingtimes.net/roles/older-people-nurses-roles/dementia-more-feared-than-cancer-by-older-patients-04-08-2014/> Retrieved 11 March 2021

<sup>2</sup> 'dead through the trespasses and sins' in v1

<sup>3</sup> 'following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air' in v2

<sup>4</sup> 'children of wrath in v3

relationship. ‘The corpse,’ ‘the slave’ together with ‘the condemned prisoner’ don’t have any sign of happiness, freedom or love. Each in its own way portrays a devastating hopeless situation as ‘you’ or ‘we’ are powerless to change. These words have negative connotations of punishment and repressions only. It is caused by leaving the relationship with God – that is, the biblical meaning of sin. As the Hebrew word sin – ‘missing the mark/goal’ indicates, sin encompasses the rest of the things. Here the goal or mark is God or godly life which we are supposed to live when we came into being.

So in Ephesians 2:4-7 shows how God has initiated the action to bring us from death to life. The keyword for salvation here is ‘life.’ The mystery of Christian existence is that we share in the life of God in the company of Christ. It also means that our relationship with God is restored. In doing so, we become the gift of God for others as our lives are marked by a sense of grace and a doing of good works to restore others’ relationship with God. When people’s fear of dementia together with death is based on our understanding of physical life, biblical understanding of life or death begins from this relationship with God.

## ***2. From death to life in John 3:14-21***

In John 3:14-21, the relationship with God is depicted as the way to eternal life. As God so loved the world, God sent the only Son into the world to save it. It also means the coming of the light into the world, which was in darkness. Jesus describes those who believe in him are receiving ‘eternal life’ by God’s love. Here eternal life doesn’t simply refer to the quantity of life but to its character. In some context, eternal life indeed refers to the length of life.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is also something other than the length of life. It exists in the present,<sup>6</sup> and comes through the action of God in Jesus Christ, who has life in himself.<sup>7</sup>

As such, life in the eternal cannot be considered without a relationship with God. Therefore biblical meaning of death means the separation from God for good. It not only means one’s physical death but a total elimination of our existence, including memories and relationships with others, which people fear for the most. Yet the Son’s coming to the world opened a new

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<sup>5</sup> John 6:58 - ‘This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.’

<sup>6</sup> John 6:54-55

<sup>7</sup> John 5:26

relationship with God which allows us to live in hope and to partake in God's mission to spread this good news to all.

### ***3. From death to life – the present***

In our storytime, we heard a story titled 'Rosie's hat.' Rosie lost her hat when a gust of wind sweeps it off her head. The hat falls onto many different hands, including people and animals. It becomes a toy for a dog, a hiding-place for a mouse, a frisbee for some children and even a nest for some birds. In the meantime, Rosie grows up, marries a man, and becomes a firefighter. In the end, when Rosie is rescuing a cat from a tree, there she finds her hat again. The question was that 'For Rosie's hat, what do you think makes it live?' We can think of a few things as possible answers. First, when something/someone lives according to the purpose of life, we may call such a person/a thing alive. When a hat is used as a hat, it makes the hat alive. In the story, after the hat was parted from Rosie, it was in the state of death as no one used the hat as a hat. Consequently, when the hat was with others, there was no joy or happiness as it was not used for its purpose. Second, as the title shows, Rosie's hat belonged to Rosie. As soon as it was lost, its life ended. But when Rosie found it eventually, it made the hat live again as their relationship was restored and the purpose of its life, too.

Our relationship with God can be compared to Rosie's hat with Rosie. The hat had no power to change its fate. When it was in others' hands, the hat was abused, tainted, and dead. Likewise, we had no power to change our future or live for the purpose of life when our relationship with God was disrupted. In Christ, we find the purpose of life as the gift of God. For dementia patients and their families, it is also very good news. Even though they don't remember the families and friends in the end, it is their loving families and friends who remember them as they are. But most importantly, it is God who remembers them as well as us as God's children as God 'will not let your foot be moved; God who keeps you will not slumber. God who keeps his children will neither slumber nor sleep.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, nothing is lost in the love of God. We will continue to reflect on this awesome God throughout the season of Lent, who is the giver of life and in Him everything is possible. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 121:3-4