



PSALM



Taking ageing and faith seriously

Registered Charity No. 1103130

Talking about Death and Dying

A PSALM Occasional Paper

The PSALM Annual Lecture delivered by Rev Dr David Primrose

Thursday 16 March 2017 at St Pancras Church, Euston Road, London

Why are we so hesitant about talking (and thinking) about death and dying when it is a key part of human experience and faith? This subject was the theme of the 2017 PSALM lecture, with much to think about and discuss. David Primrose began with a challenge to us to help to develop ‘death – confident congregations,’ and gave us a dozen ‘D’s’ about death.

Death and dying.

David’s own diocese of Lichfield traces its origins to St Chad, and reminds its churches to ‘Come and follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad.’ His story can be found in Bede’s ‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People’ which gives considerable detail about his godly death. Other comments on death and dying:

‘When the time comes for you to die, make sure that’s all you’ve got left to do.’ (Jim Elliot)

‘From sudden death, good Lord, deliver us.’ (1662 Book of Common Prayer Litany)

Around a quarter of people have a sudden death. Most of us have some warning and time to prepare ourselves practically and emotionally, yet find it difficult to do so.

Death and defilement.

Many cultures consider corpses to be unclean and shy away from all aspects of death as if it were contagious. Most people in Britain die in hospitals or hospices rather than at home, whatever their personal preference – privatising, isolating and removing death from everyday life. Yet there are examples of people who are willing to be alongside those who are rejected by society as they face death. Could this be a role for us and our churches?

Death and Duty.

When faced with death, we want to do ‘our duty’ in a way that is culturally appropriate. But what happens when the person is not actually ‘our loved one’ – for whatever reason – and this is a last chance to put things right in some way? The demands of culture and duty go deep, whatever we might be feeling. ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’ (Peter Drucker)

Death and Detachment.

Many people nearing death begin to disengage from life and even their most significant relationships, 'turning their face to the wall.' This can be painful and disturbing to family members, forcing the dying person to struggle to remain alive because of the relationship. How often are family and friends at the bedside, and then death occurs when they have 'just popped out'? We need to think of death as part of a life journey and be prepared to let go.

Death and Dependency.

'Independent living' is often no such thing! It can mean failure of proper care, enforced isolation and loneliness, and fear of being a burden as daily life becomes more difficult to negotiate. Our aim as human beings should not be self-sufficiency but mature inter-dependence. British culture has lost the sense that it is a privilege to care for older people and would benefit from regaining this. Can we set up 'Compassionate communities' to provide networks of support for those who are dying, caring for them or bereaved.

<http://www.dyingmatters.org/sites/default/files/user/documents/Resources/Community%20Pack/1-Introduction-1.pdf>

Death and Dementia.

The onset of dementia is feared and often seen as a 'living death' as it reshapes families and re-defines what it means to be a person. The capacity to access wisdom and experience is lost and it is difficult to retain a sense of personhood. Churches have a role to play in practical activities (as 'dementia friendly churches' or providing facilities), in supporting carers and maintaining a sense that the person is valued, known and loved by God.

Death and Depression.

Depression is part of life at any age, but it is more prevalent as we grow older (1 in 12 of people over 65), face increased loneliness and the problems of aging – and becomes even more complicated when approaching death. Issues of assisted dying or suicide can arise. It is important to proclaim that every person has real value even if they may not feel it; we can talk more about mental health as an everyday issue throughout life and offer support and time to people who are depressed about terminal illness or bereavement.

Death and Disability.

We are getting older as individuals and as a population. The third age brings freedom from core responsibilities of earlier life; in the fourth age those freedoms become compromised. Most of us can expect some 8-9 years preceding death with a diagnosable disability – loss of sight, hearing, movement, mental capacity etc. How can we anticipate this and find ways to give meaning to a more circumscribed life? Those who have lived with disability from childhood can teach us now what we will need later – life can be fulfilling despite disability, and vulnerability can be an opportunity for deep encounter.

Death and Donor.

What if the Church saw blood and organ donation as part of its giving? This can be promoted as generous living and using death as a means of life for others. <http://fleshandblood.org/>

Death and Debt.

Funeral poverty too often tips vulnerable people into unsustainable debt. The average cost of a funeral is £4-8,000, and there is pressure to 'do it right' - especially if the person who has died is not actually the 'loved one.' A local credit union agreed with Lichfield Diocese that they would give a decision in 2 working days on a £3,000 loan for a basic funeral; resources for clergy were produced and a simple leaflet for them to leave with bereaved families – but it was still difficult for the clergy to mention funeral costs during visits. The Quaker Fair Funeral pledge encourages funeral directors to put their costs on their website, and to provide (and draw attention to) a cheap basic funeral. Could our churches ask funeral firms to take the pledge to help avoid pushing people into debt? <http://fairfuneralscampaign.org.uk/>

Death and Doubt.

The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. We need faith when times are uncertain, and the doubts surrounding death are a context in which faith can be deepened. As Christians, we have a message of hope and eternity and can be confident about God's love.

Death and ...

We were invited to add our own final 'D' - despair, doctrine, our own fears or names – whether they begin with D or not!

In small groups, we discussed our 12th 'D', and looked at which of the themes were most significant to us. Comments included:

- **Debt.** Funerals can be filled with grace and prayerfulness, but the expense can be prohibitive when relatives go over the top – including examples of when professional mourners are employed.
- **Dementia** was mentioned by several groups, with issues about how to keep in touch with the person and retain and deepen relationships despite loss of memory and changes in personality. We were reminded that conversation in these situations is not so much about exchange of information as building or maintaining relationship, however repetitive it may feel to us.
- **Dependency** and the issues it raises in a culture that values independence. This can affect many of the other 'Ds' and aspects of life, and become a 'pulsebeat of worry-some-ness.'

- **Defilement** and the way that different cultures talk about death – or avoid it. This linked to another set of ‘Ds’ – desolation, desecration and defence. British society doesn’t retain rituals and strategies to cope with death and bereavement and handles this badly. We need to develop good ways culturally and socially to give people confidence that they know what to do and say to those who are dying and bereaved rather than leaving it all to the professionals.
- **Hope** as Christians in the resurrection and life beyond the present. Death has been privatised and secularised, and the depths of Christian thinking need to be reclaimed. We are living in eternity, and the context in which death occurs is one in which we can say ‘Blessed be God for ever.’

In closing comments, David challenged those present to take back to their own settings one or more of the points discussed to help develop death-confident churches and congregations.

Questions for personal or group reflection and discussion

- Which of the ‘dozen Ds’ has a particular resonance or relevance for me? Why is this?
- Is there any other issue about death that is significant? How can this be explored further?
- What difference does faith make to the way I think about death?
- What passages from the Bible or other sources have I found helpful?
- Is there anything I need to do now (practical or emotional) to prepare for death?

God of time and eternity, you are present in both light and darkness,
and know the span and frailty of human life.
Your loving hands hold us in life and in death.
Grant us peace and the comfort of your presence, now and at the end of life;
Through Jesus Christ, who died and is alive for evermore.

David Primrose is Director of Transforming Communities for the Diocese of Lichfield, and currently chairs the Social Responsibility Network. He encourages death confident congregations, helped develop Grave Talk, promotes advance funeral conversations, sees organ donation as part of Christian giving, and is concerned when death leads a family into debt.