

If I were to ask you what the purpose of the church is, I wonder what you would say? I rather shocked an ordinand years ago by telling him that I thought the purpose of the church was to teach people how to die. I still do.

Of course, there is more to it than that. There was a Christian Aid programme a few years ago which had the strapline 'We believe in life before death' I don't for one moment mean to suggest that the here and now isn't important. Global warming is the single most pressing issue for all humanity in generations.

The trouble is that it is easy for the church to become just one organisation among others seeking to do good, be it through climate activity or social care. It's easier, too, to find allies when we're concerned with the second great commandment than the first. Who is not 'for' human flourishing? Talk of God can produce embarrassment, though.

As a way into the first great commandment of Jesus, maybe the time has come for us to talk more about death. We have an opportunity to do so because of the Coronavirus. Until a year ago death had become a taboo. Death had replaced sex as the great 'no-no', not to be mentioned. The pandemic should have changed all that. The number dying have been reported every day and we have been reminded of the terrible tragedy of people dying in their thousands. Death is back centre stage.

That's how it used to be in the days when life was experienced by most as 'nasty, brutish and short' death was all around. Anyone doing research on their family tree, as I have, will be struck by how many children died before they had reached adulthood in Victorian England. That has remained the case in many parts of the world: we have a Malawian living with us and he will tell you that most people there lose at least one sibling in childhood.

I think the time has come for us to contemplate our own mortality and encourage others to do the same – just as people used to, and some still, do, when they walked past the graves of family and friends on their way through the churchyard to the church every week.

How do we prepare people to die, rather than just talk about death, though? There's the obvious imperative to talk about faith. We also need to make our peace with 'letting go'. All the little 'lettings go' are preparation for the big 'letting go.' In my experience of life and ministry good deaths are experienced by those who have made such peace. They are not desperate to 'hang on' to life in this world.

We have had to let go of lots of things temporarily this last year. We shall have plenty of opportunity these next few months, as a 'new normal' is established, to discern what things we are being called to let go of permanently – as individuals and communities, not least worshipping communities.

As Christians, we have an opportunity to learn again to view our lives in the light of eternity, to see death as a pathway to new life. We don't know what it will be like any more than an unborn child can know anything about life outside the womb but we can be confident that God's love in Jesus is stronger than death.

Being aware of our mortality can help us to live life in the present as well as be prepared to die, though. As my late wife Denise wrote, shortly before she died of cancer in 2014:

*Contemplating mortality is not about being prepared to die, it is about being prepared to live. And that is what I am doing now, more freely and more fully than I have since childhood. The cancer has not made life more precious – that would make it seem like something fragile to lock away in the cupboard. No, it has made it more delicious.*

Let's embrace death and talk about death and mortality. It will enable us to experience life as 'delicious'. I believe there is an evangelistic imperative to do so, too, if we are to do properly be the Church, do as God wills and live out the first great commandment.