

CESA Values Day 2015 – The Sanctity of Life
Psalm 139, Genesis 1:26-28, Psalm 82:1-4, Matthew 10:29-30

Introduction

On 18th July 2014 the House of Lords debated the “Assisted Dying” bill proposed by Lord Falconer. The proposal would allow those with a terminal illness, and given less than 6 months to live, to ask for assistance in ending their lives. It has been a matter of huge debate and has divided the opinion of faith leaders. The former Arch Bishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, has stated that he believes that assisted dying was “quite compatible” with being a Christian. The current Arch Bishop, Most Rev Justin Welby, is against the bill and states “*Compassion is not simply a feeling; it is a commitment to sharing in the suffering of others while trying to alleviate it. True compassion can be shown through care, through expending time and resources on those suffering and through offering hope even in the darkest of circumstances.*” With such polar opposites on such an emotive issue in what ways can we make sense of this? More to the point, how can we support those who find themselves in this very dark place, and protect those who are vulnerable? In a recent survey 70% of those questioned said they would support assisted dying “but some 47% said they believed legalizing assisted suicide would ‘inevitably’ lead to some vulnerable people opting to end their lives to avoid becoming a burden to their loved ones” (The Times July 19th 2014).

It is not only those who are close to the end of their lives that are at risk, the very fabric of life itself is under pressure. At the time of writing proposals are being put before Parliament to allow the creation of embryos using the DNA from 3 people. The resulting child would effectively have DNA from 2 mothers and a Father. In addition, in England and Wales in 2013 there were over 185,000 abortions, of which only 1% were attributed to there being a perceived problem with the embryo.

Preparation.

I am aware that this is a huge subject and you could find yourself drowning in a sea of articles and statistics. First of all take some time to pray. Pray that God will lead you into His truth and for the direction that He wants to take you, and for the congregation that you will be speaking to. Ask for a heart of compassion as we speak. For many people this will awaken memories of their own loved ones who have been, or may still be, suffering from terminal illnesses. It could be that they themselves are suffering. We need to be mindful that suffering of any kind is never a theoretical exercise. Real suffering is faced by real people and we need to extend the real compassion of Jesus and the real hope that He offers in order to be the Light and Salt of the world.

Second, take some time to meditate on Psalm 139. Read it through a number of times, in different versions and on a number of occasions. Personalize it to yourself, reflect on how this applies to each and every one of us. God saw OUR unformed body in the secret place. He knows all about US. Note down what stands out to you in this Psalm. Has there been something that has been reinforced or is there something that you had not seen before?

Thirdly, read through some of the material and website articles on this issue.

The following is an outline that could be used. Please don't feel constrained to follow this outline. It is here to provide a starting point not a shackle. If the Lord takes you in a different direction follow Him.

Sermon Outline.

1. Problem of pain (Psalm 139)

The reality of pain and suffering is evident all around us. Everything is done in our society to eradicate pain. We don't just have tablets to take away pain we have "pain killers". Some have used the presence of pain to question the existence of God. The premise goes something like, "If God is all powerful, He could eliminate evil and suffering. If God is all good, He would eliminate evil and suffering. Evil and suffering is not eliminated. Therefore, there is no God."

There is a flaw in this argument. Without there being an absolute moral standard there is no way of determining what is good and what is evil. If the view is that we are nothing more than a cosmic accident then any suffering is just a product of the survival of the fittest. However, deep down we know that there is something profoundly wrong. This is not how things should be. We realise that we live in a fallen world. This was not how it was in the beginning. We live in a world where we have been given a choice. One of the greatest choices we have is the capacity to love. What we must remember is that for love to be meaningful it must be given without compulsion. We must be free to choose to love. This means that there is a possibility that we can choose not to love, we can choose the wrong path and that is what happened at the fall. The consequence of that is what we see all around us. Pain, sorrow, torment, work became toil and the relationship between God and man was fractured. So what did God do about this? He sent His Son. This broken world has broken God's heart. Jesus wept of the brokenness brought on through the death of his friend Lazarus, He wept over Jerusalem and the rejection of all He had brought. He hates death and the ways we invent to try and get out of the mess we find ourselves in. Broken laws, leading to broken lives and a broken world which breaks God's heart. Then what we read is "On the night he was betrayed Jesus took bread and said, this is my body broken for you." God's solution, on the cross He is broken for us. And there He conquers over it and He now offers us wholeness through His risen body. When we find ourselves in our own painful place, when those around us are suffering, we can be assured that God is not inactive in His response to us and that He knows more fully than we can understand. Psalm 139 shows us that He is aware of every aspect of our lives and of those we love. He understands and went to the cross in order to win us back. We need to understand that there will be a day when "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Rev 21:4. Until that time we need to trust in Him, and in answer to the continued problem of pain realise that, "An all good, all powerful God created the world. God creates a world where evil and suffering is permitted and has a good reason for doing so. Therefore, the world contains evil and suffering." Alvin Plantinga. To the non-Christian there is no point to suffering, to the Christian it is a completely different issue. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28. It has to be noted that this verse does not state that everything that happens to us will be good, but rather that everything works for the good of those who love him. "Christians find suffering difficult - but it is built into our world-view. It has no purpose in the mind-set of unbelievers; hence their problem." (Richard Bewes). "It is sometimes true that suffering can sometimes seem meaningless to us; it is never to be sought or endured simply for its own sake, and so far as it is possible it should be eased, it can be very terrible, but it is not the worst evil." (Dictionary of Christian Ethics)

2. Privileged people (Gen 1:26-28)

What is it that gives our lives meaning and purpose? What is it that sets us apart from the rest of creation? Why is it that human life, in particular, is precious? The reality is very straightforward. Our lives have intrinsic value because we are created in God's image. As Christians we see life as God ordained and planned. "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." Psalm 139:16. We are created in the image of God, "so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27. This means that our significance, our purpose in life, comes not from what we can achieve, or from our capacity for thought, but rather from the mere fact that we are. Our worth comes from God Himself. Contemporary thought advocates that human life has no inherent intrinsic value. This is evidenced in the way in which embryos in the early stages of development are seen as nothing more than a collection of cells rather than a human life. The Christian standpoint has a very different declaration, "My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth." Psalm 139:15. This shows us that life begins at conception. God's care for us begins well before our birth. God's care continues throughout the whole of our life, from beginning to end.

When we realise that our value and worth is not determined by our position, what our academic qualifications are, our career, or our physical capabilities then this brings us tremendous freedom. The problem with basing our value and worth on the things that we can do, is what happens when we can no longer do those things? Does that mean that we are no longer worth anything? No, absolutely not. What about those who are born with disabilities? Nick Vujicic was born with a rare condition that means he has no arms and no legs. As far as the world is concerned there would be nothing that he could do that would make a meaningful contribution to society. However, that's not the way he sees it. Nick spends his time as an inspirational speaker, travelling all over the world speaking to 100,000's of people. In 2012 he was married and Nick and his wife now have a 1 year old Son. Nick is a Christian. (see www.lifewithoutlimbs.org).

So many people are being lulled into the mistaken belief that once we are incapable of the things that we used to do, or that we fall short of an arbitrarily determined measure of the quality of life, then the only option is to end that life. Life is precious, life has meaning, life has purpose. God has ordained it.

3. Positioned to protect. (Psalm 82:1-4)

As the people of God we are to stand with those the world would reject and to speak out on behalf of the marginalised and vulnerable. "Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." Psalm 82:3-4. One of the dangers of the current push towards assisted dying is that wherever voluntary euthanasia is adopted, involuntary euthanasia follows. There is anecdotal evidence that suggests in those countries that have adopted euthanasia elderly people are fearful to go into hospital. This is due to the blurred boundaries between doctors and nurses who would care for them becoming those who would now potentially end their lives. There are many who have grave concern over the impact the legalisation of assisted dying would have on vulnerable people. In an age of limited funds for the health service and the average life expectancy increasing is it easy to see how the "right to die" would lead to the "duty to die". Even the phrase "right to die" is misleading. In the debate in the House of Lords Lord Tebbit made this point "Baroness Greengross referred several times to the right which we all have to take our own lives. We do not have that right – we only have the capacity to do it." What is a right for one person can quickly impact on the rights of others. "Advocates of euthanasia passionately believe that all human beings (provided that they are rational and competent) have the right and should be able to exercise that right to make their own

decision as to how they want to dispose of their own life. No other individual or institution should have the power to infer or circumvent this right. However as John Donne said, 'No man is an island, entire of itself; everyone is a continent, a part of the main.' The fact is that when an individual decides to take his or her own life it has a profound and unavoidable effect on the lives of those around them. That same individual exerting their right to autonomy has removed the same right from the survivors." (www.care.org.uk)

There are many alternatives that are glossed over by those who advocate assisted dying, not the least of which is the palliative care offered by hospices. Here support is found, not only for the person with the ailment, but also for the family. In these instances it is possible for life to be lived.

There is no doubt that many people face horrendous ordeals when it comes to suffering. We must never diminish the reality of this. In this instance we should walk alongside these folk to be a light in a dark place. We should always remember that we serve a Saviour who suffered. He knows full well what people are going through. He is our ever present help in times of trouble.

Conclusion.

All world views have to contend with the problem of pain, even those who say there is no God. Only Christianity offers any reasonable explanation and answer to the problem. Human life is precious and has purpose because God has created us in His image. He has placed something of the eternal in each of us.

We are to stand up for those who are vulnerable and are suffering. We can show that this life is not all that there is, there is an eternal life to come. Whilst we may never truly understand on this side of eternity why we go through the things we do, we can be certain of this, there will come a time when "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Rev 21:4

Useful websites :-

www.care.org.uk

www.lifewithoutlimbs.org

www.christian.org.uk