

## St Mary Abbots, Eucharist

Lent 3

Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-3, Luke 13:1-9

Father Christopher

*'Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days.'*

So says psalm 39. But how many of us want to know how we will die? Most of us prefer not to think about our end I think; or if we do, either to hope it is sudden, or that we will die in our sleep without knowing about it. It is not fashionable to think about our death, but instead we are told to seize the day, to live life to the full, cramming it with as much self-focussed pleasure as we can.

In medieval England things were quite different. To die a good death was thought to be just about the most important thing you could prepare and hope for. And that was because it would determine what happened to you afterwards: whether you went to heaven or hell; and, for most people, God-willing, how long they would spend in purgatory before going to heaven.

If we think of judgment at all, we tend to think of it in a far gentler way: most, or even all, people are probably saved. We don't believe in anything as old-fashioned as a moment of judgment, which now looks like something of a metaphor, but rather I suppose, if you are generally a nice person you will probably go to be with God somehow; and if you are not, then, well, perhaps you will just cease to be, or will somehow be without God through your own choice.

I exaggerate a little, but I probably also have similar ideas, to the extent that I think about life after death at all. I remember being surprised during curacy that old people would want to talk about their fears for what would happen when they died. And perhaps its not featuring on my radar was more to do with my age than a general societal shift.

There was clearly a far greater sense of the constant closeness of death in medieval England, and indeed in the ancient world – in the middle east of Jesus's day. And indeed, as we lose friends and family of our own, particularly those whose death seems untimely or tragic, death seems suddenly closer.

That might make us leap all the more for the *carpe diem* maxim. But I think the question posed by our readings this morning is, if our life could be taken away at any point, what kind of life do we want to seize in the time we have remaining?

When asked about life after death, a rabbi not long after Jesus said that you'd be fine as long as you repented the day before your death. When asked the obvious follow up question - but how do you know when you are going to die? - he said 'Oh, I can't help you with that; so, I suppose you'd better repent every day.'

Repentance, like preparing for a holy death, has rather a bad rap these days. It's not the first thing we say to someone whom we're hoping to bring to church: we might say, 'Oh, there's a lovely family atmosphere', or 'We have excellent music', not 'Why not come along and repent you of your sins'. And yet repentance is central to our faith. We tend to think of it as meaning that we constantly beat ourselves up about how awful we are. It is in fact quite the reverse. In turning around, as the word literally means, it is about turning away from those things we wish we had not done, or wish we could stop doing, and turning to God. It is about being liberated.

All of us have a gap between the people we know we could be - should be - and the way we actually behave. And we have all, no doubt, had fractured relationships with others as a result of the hurt caused by not being able to deal with the sins that, as we put it, separate us from God and neighbour.

That is part of normal human existence, but we as Christians believe that we have a way of being freed from, as St Paul put it, '*doing not what I want, but the very thing that I hate.*' Healing broken relationships, if we can, of course takes far longer and takes ongoing work; but in repenting, and in seeking God's forgiveness, we grow closer to Him, again and again, and also draw closer to one another.

Repentance is therefore not about punishment, though it must come with real sorrow for our sins, but is rather about finding liberation in the forgiveness which we know God gives us. And in building the habit of true repentance as a regular part of our spiritual life, not only are we freed from the sins that cling so closely, but we grow in holiness as we learn to walk with Christ, if stumbling along the way.

I find that I have to go to private confession with a priest to truly face the ways in which I fall short, hard as that is at first, and that is why even the Book of Common Prayer exhorts people to go to confession if they feel the need so as to gain a clear conscience. But whether you make your confession in that way (and we are available to hear confessions here, by appointment), or simply in the general confession at the start of the Eucharist; there is no doubt that repentance and forgiveness are at the core of our faith, and are central to growing in holiness, which is all of our calling.

In Jesus's time it was commonly thought that people were punished by bad things happening to them. Jesus doesn't say that that *doesn't* happen, but he does shock his audience by referring to two incidents which will have been vivid for His hearers: when Pilate mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices; and when the tower of Siloam, in Jerusalem's city walls, fell and killed 18. Both incidents will no doubt have been taken as dreadful omens, and as a punishment for those who were killed, people probably wondering what they had done to deserve so gruesome a death.

Jesus unsettles his hearers by saying that they were no more sinful than anyone else. As I said a few weeks ago, we, likewise, have not done anything particularly good to deserve living a charmed, privileged existence here in London. We might just as easily have been born in the middle of the Syrian civil war, or any other benighted part of the world.

We should live as though death is close, not so as to be morbid, but because it might be, and because, paradoxically, it makes us live a better life. The seeming obsession with death in medieval Europe may seem extreme to us; but in ignoring death, in pushing it out of our life, and wanting it to come unawares, we take the other extreme.

If we live as though life is fragile and fleeting, we either live hedonistically, or with holiness. As Christians we are not nihilists, and we must therefore, in the words of Isaiah, '*Seek the Lord while He may be found.*' This is not to live in a naïve, Pollyanna-ish, way, but it is to turn away from what we are least proud of in our life, from all of those ways of being towards others and ourselves that we like least – not ignoring them, but owning them before God, seeking forgiveness and beginning again, with His Spirit.

The language of the fig tree in our gospel might seem harsh: '*Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?*' And yet, like us, it is given another chance to bear fruit. Like us, given the chance, God will dig around its roots and make space for it to grow in goodness. Like us, God will feed it, and help it to blossom.

This Lent, let us return to God, repenting of what we would have lie behind us. May God dig around our roots, giving us free soil in which to be who He would have us be. And may He feed us with Himself; that we may grow more and more into the likeness of His Son, who gave His life for us. Amen