

Facing our own mortality

“Remember how fleeting is my life.
For what futility have you created all men!
What man can live and not see death,
or save himself from the power of the grave?”

Psalm 89:47-48

“Death is the destiny of every man;
the living should take this to heart.”

Ecclesiastes 7:2

The scriptures speak so profoundly of the inevitability and universality of death and yet in our western culture the subject is often avoided, hidden away and certainly not something for polite company to talk about.

The psychoanalyst, Elliot Jaques, who is credited with coining the phrase ‘mid-life crisis’, saw the realisation of personal mortality as the key marker of mid-life. (McGuinness p71)

Midlife may be the first time that we have been confronted by death close at hand. Perhaps the death of one of our parents or even the early death of a close friend or colleague, who may be about our age, causes the reality that our life will come to an end and that we have no control over the time, the place or the circumstances of our own death.

“Death and dying are not just ‘out there’ as abstract theoretical issues. Death is here in our midst.....As I get older my own death becomes a matter for reflection.” (Wyatt p191)

During the first half of life time seems to stretch before us, there is so much to do, to achieve and to experience. Life is full of adventure and possibilities and we attack it with a kind of fearlessness and invincibility. As we enter the second half of life, the illusion that we are indestructible fades and the theory that our days are numbered begins to register as a reality.

For some, facing personal mortality may have come through a recent health scare or a near miss on the roads. For others the truth may be all too real after receiving an unfavourable diagnosis of a terminal illness. But whatever the circumstances, facing our personal mortality will have a profound impact on us emotionally, causing us to feel vulnerable, anxious, possibly fearful, concerned and responsible for our loved ones. These are understandable human responses and may also affect us as Christian believers. Perhaps reflecting on some of our intuitive responses to the idea of death will help us to explore these reactions.

Responses to death and dying:-

Outrage

Death shocks us, especially if it is early or unexpected because it seems unnatural and unfair. Sometimes life seems to have been cut short for no discernible good reason or purpose. We intuitively sense that this was never God’s original plan. He set eternity in our hearts and the finality of death and decay appals us.

“God showed that His original intention for human beings was everlasting life. In biblical thought, the death of human beings, in all its horror and mystery, is not ‘natural’ it is not the way it was meant to be.....The deep intuition which most of us share, that physical death (especially the death of a child or a young person) is an outrage, an alien interruption in the nature of being, reflects the original creation order..... We were never intended to die: we were made to live for ever. That is why death is the ‘last enemy’ 1 Corinthians15:26.” (Wyatt p70)

Dylan Thomas expresses that inner rage against the idea of death in the poem he wrote as his own father lay dying:-

“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Human beings were never meant to die but due to the disobedience of the fall and because as human beings we are ‘in Adam’, like the first humans we too are subject to death and decay. Physical death is the penalty for sin, it is also the symbol of spiritual death – man’s ultimate separation from God.

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” Romans 5:12

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23

“Death as we know it, with discernible decline ordinarily proceeding it, is no part of God’s good creation, but is his judgement on sin, as Genesis 3 declares.” (Packer)

Fear

“The inevitable accompaniment of death is fear. The blessing of human life is transformed into a slavery of fear, especially fear of death. The terrible all-pervading fear of death drives human beings to extraordinary and frequently pathetic lengths.” (Wyatt p71)

Medical and scientific research is often dedicated to the attempt to extend human life, which, if it can improve the quality of the life lived, would have merit, but ultimately it cannot solve the problem of our fear of death itself. The scriptures claim that the only real answer to the problem of our fear of death is in Christ.

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Hebrews 2:14-15

John Wyatt would also suggest that the end of physical life may be seen as evidence of God’s grace. Indeed C.S. Lewis used the phrase a “severe mercy” to describe the fact that when human beings were cast out of the Garden of Eden, to prevent them from accessing the Tree of Life, it was God’s providential care, since human beings were not meant to live for ever in there now fallen degraded state. Seen in this light, the numbering of the days of our physical

life, linked to our redemption in Christ and ultimate hope of Heaven, is indeed grace and mercy.

“All our days are under your wrath; we finish our days with a moan. The length of our years is seventy years – or eighty if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, but they quickly pass, and we fly away.” Psalm 90:9-10

“Death an evil to be fought against, death God’s mercy to be accepted.” (Wyatt)

Endings and losses

One of the concerns that we may have in reflecting on our own mortality is the endings and losses that we will face and although we will have faced many endings before in our lives, this is the ultimate ending and its utter finality makes it seem so cruel. We are hard-wired to seek to survive, to enjoy all of God’s creation and his many good gifts; to delight in family and friends; to see and to do and to experience so many things, which all seem unfinished!

Mark Ashton, an Anglican vicar, who was diagnosed with inoperable cancer at 62 years old, wrote a wonderful testimony of his experiences and more especially of his certain hope of the resurrection called “On my way to heaven”. But he was also very clear about the painful endings and losses that he was facing. The greatest loss that he faced was relationships and he described death as ‘a devastating barrier’:-

“There is no question about the savagery of death in this regard. There is no more devastating barrier in all of human experience than between the living and the dead. The soft soap and wishful thinking peddled by false prophets in the face of death (that the loved one is ‘just in the next room’, that he is ‘looking down on us all the time’, that ‘she will be invisibly present at every family gathering’) are iniquitous, because they fly in the face of all human experience of death, and have no basis in the word of God. Christ is the only hope we have.”

Fear of the process of dying

One of the most significant changes in facing death and dying, especially in secular culture is to hope for a rapid and unexpected death. John Wyatt describes this change in attitude:-

“It is fascinating that, whereas to many previous generations, sudden death was seen as one of the worst ways to die, now it has become the best. To be catapulted into eternity without preparation, without a chance of repentance, unable to say goodbye, was viewed with horror by our forebears. Some saw sudden death as evidence of God’s judgement on a godless life. But to modern people it has become an ideal. The catastrophic accident, the explosion, the sudden cardiac arrest: ‘Well at least he went quickly. Never knew what hit him, lucky beggar! I hope I go like that.’”

This attitude to death seems to have its origin, not necessarily in the dread of death, but in the fear of the process of dying and it is also one of the push factors in the lobby for assisted suicide. John Wyatt, who writes widely on this subject, cites three main fears of the process of dying.

Fear of pain

This is not only fear of physical pain but of 'total pain', which is distress with many components, for example:-

- An elderly person may be dying of cancer, which has spread to the bones and thus he is in continual pain
- He is also in psychological distress because he is frightened of what the future may hold – will the pain get worse? Will he have to leave home and go into hospital?
- He is in relational distress because the family is putting on a brave face and refusing to acknowledge the reality of what is happening
- He is in spiritual distress because he is confronting the ultimate reality of death without any sense of meaning and purpose. What has his life been for? What is there to hope for?

“This is total pain, and as a society we see pain as useless, futile, destructive, incomprehensible and terrifying and suffering is seen to have no value, since the purpose of existence is for many to maximise personal happiness, and if we can't be happy we can at least try to anaesthetise the pain.” (Wyatt p198)

John Wyatt would say that recent advances in palliative care have been the answer to the fear of pain and that specialised medical nursing techniques and a multidisciplinary team of carers seeking to treat the 'whole person' in response to the issue of total pain, is a way of helping dying people to make the most of their lives.

Kathryn Mannix describes her work as a palliative care consultant in this way:-

“A mixture of team work with clinical detective work to find the origins of patient's symptoms in order to offer the best palliation; of attention to psychological needs and resilience of patients and their families; honesty and truth in the face of advancing disease; and recognition that each patient as a unique, whole person who is the key member of the team looking after them. Working with, rather than doing to: a complete paradigm shift.”

Wyatt also sees the work of the hospice movement as creating a place of hope and laughter as well as tears and pain, a place where people live before they die. He would say that the most deep rooted fear for the dying in our society is the agony of being alone and isolated and this can be answered by Christian caring and above all being there.

Fear of indignity

Fear of degeneration and indignity is a deep anxiety for modern people as they face their mortality. Modern medicine may be able to deal with the physical pain but the medical interventions, incontinence and needing to have basic needs taken care of by others, so that they feel like a child, is felt to be undignified. “It is not death that people fear most but undignified dying.” Quote from the Evening Standard Newspaper.

John Wyatt suggests that this issue requires compassion mingled with respect. Modern medicine can seem to distance and demean patients but there needs to be respect-love,

which recognises and honours the unique dignity of every human being made in God's image – the Christian prescription for the fear of indignity.

“When we love someone in the present, showing practical, empathetic, respectful, sacrificial caring, we are also pointing them to the future, to the hope of resurrection. We are treating someone now in the light of what they are going to be.....We do not treat them with respect because of what they once were. We treat them with respect because of the God-like image, which, in his grace, they will display in the future.” (Wyatt p273)

This is Christian hope.

Fear of dependence

The most deep rooted fear of all is the fear of becoming dependent and of losing our freedom. Ronald Dworkin, a legal philosopher, sees freedom as the cardinal and absolute requirement of self-respect. He would say that no one treats his life as having any intrinsic, objective importance unless he insists on leading that life himself, not being ushered along it by others.

John Harris draws the same conclusion that autonomy, the freedom to choose how and why to live, makes our life our own and gives our life value. Radical individualism is certainly a strong postmodern concept among the young of today along with the desire to be the master of my own fate, to write my own script and to do it my way.

John Wyatt says that the fear of becoming dependant on others and the desperate desire to be in control is perhaps the hardest fear for modern people to overcome. At a simple level the answer is a Christian world view – that dependence is part of the human story.

To learn dependence requires humility and maturity. It also requires trust, which for many in society has been eroded away and destroyed. The answer for this deep fear is the Christian gospel. It recognises the painful and liberating truth that we cannot do it ‘our way’. We have to relinquish our desperate attempts at self-sufficiency and to learn about grace, that the most valuable things in life come as a free gift.

The sense of futility

“The entrance of death into human life condemns our physical existence to an awful futility....’Dust you are and to dust you will return’ Genesis 9:19” Wyatt p72

For those without hope in God, the certainty of the resurrection of the body and eternity in heaven, it may seem that our physical life is little different from the animals. This was the conclusion of the writer of Ecclesiastes:-

“Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies so dies the other.....man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless.”

Ecclesiastes 3:18-21

The writer concludes, who knows what will happen to him after death, therefore he might as well enjoy his work because that is his lot. In other words he has become resigned to this life being all there is, which can result in this sense of futility in which nothing really matters.

Futility and grief can be compounded by the process of aging, or the decline due to the onset of chronic or terminal illness. This is the bondage to decay that is referred to in Romans chapter 8, the bondage to decay that the whole creation is longing and groaning to be liberated from, when we enter the Kingdom of God.

“Growing old makes a body and an inner self part company, as one ages and the other stays young. It leaves a person depressed at the disconnect between the mirror and the mind – how we look to others versus how we think about ourselves – and generates denial as our limbs begin to do with difficulty the things they used to do with ease. This process leaves a person blinking in perplexity at the speed of life, which has hurtled towards its conclusion just as it seemed to really get going. Youthfulness leaves so quickly. And entering old age itself is to arrive in a season beset by all manner of difficulties, pains and sorrows.”
(Gibson p128)

The bible is unsparing in its bleak depiction of the process of physical aging. Its progressive decay, biological failures and social losses are graphically described in Ecclesiastes 12:-

“In old age your body no longer serves you so well.
Muscles slacken, grip weakens, joints stiffen.
The shades are pulled down on the world.
You can't come and go at will. Things grind to a halt.
The hum of the household fades away.
You are wakened now by birdsong.
Hikes to the mountains are a thing of the past.
Even a stroll down the road has its terrors.
Your hair turns apple blossom white,
Adorning a fragile and impotent matchstick body.
Yes, you are well on your way to eternal rest,
While your friends make plans for your funeral.” (The Message)

“This perspective helps us to retain a sense of the limitations of medicine and healthcare. For all our wonderful knowledge and technology we are unable to redeem our physical bodies from the cycle of death and decay.” (Wyatt p73)

The apostle Paul wrote of this experience:-

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal.”
2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Suffering

Another concern that many of us have as we consider the end of our own life, is the fear of suffering. “To the secular mind, suffering is a futile, bewildering and purposeless reality. It

is the negation of all that is good in life. It is the destroyer of autonomy – an evil to be feared and to be avoided at all costs.” (Wyatt p73)

Facing our own death and the suffering that it may involve can be a severe test of our faith and our view of God. It may cause us to struggle with God’s sovereign control in our life and circumstances as well as his love and goodness, when things don’t seem to be working out as we would have wanted. If we have prayed and God just doesn’t seem to hear, let alone answer the pleadings of our hearts. “Life experience can stretch our spiritual life to breaking point as we try to hold onto our image of God’s goodness through the dark filters of adversity or unanswered prayer.” (McGuinness p77)

But the biblical view of suffering is that it can never be meaningless, even if it seems so, because it comes at the hand of a loving God. Jerry Bridges writes of this mystery:-

“All people - believers as well as unbelievers – experience anxiety, frustration, heartache and disappointment. Some suffer intense physical pain and catastrophic tragedies. But that which should distinguish the suffering of believers from unbelievers is the confidence that our suffering is under the control of an all-powerful and all-loving God; our suffering has meaning and purpose in God’s eternal plan, and he brings or allows to come into our lives only that which is for his glory and our good.” Bridges p31

Mark Ashton wrote that in the last months of his life he experienced God speaking to him and comforting him through the scriptures with a directness that he had not known before. He was encouraged in his faith and trust that as the distance to the finishing line became less, God would get him through.

Anonymous “Suffering is not a question that demands an answer, it is not a problem that demands a solution, it is a mystery which demands a presence.”

So what can help us, whether we are fit and healthy now, with both energy and capacity at our disposal, and with an awareness that we are to number our days and use them wisely, or whether we are already facing the limitations of the aging process, experiencing failing health or been given the news that our life is to end soon?

Being ready

The Lord Jesus told a very sobering parable about being ready in Luke 12:13-21. In his book ‘Making the most of the rest of your life’ John Chapman uses this parable to point out some of the dangers of not being ready:-

“This man had lots of plans for this life but had totally neglected the life after this one. God labelled him a fool.....He makes three fundamental mistakes. Firstly he mistakes himself for God.....He is the centre of his life. God is excluded. We know this because he is said to be ‘not rich toward God’. Secondly he mistakes time for eternity. He thinks that he has ‘ample goods laid up for many years’, but he doesn’t have many years. In fact, he doesn’t have any years left. His third mistake is to think that life is about making money and having things. But what good are possessions in the new life for which he is totally ill equipped? Not to plan for the inevitable is really foolish.”

Practical preparedness

This may seem mundane but is often avoided or put off by many people, perhaps it reinforces the reality of their own mortality. For some it may feel like they are bringing the end nearer by dwelling on these issues. For others life is just too busy and it is something that they will think about when they retire, or when life gets easier.

It is also important to discuss the plans you have made, the provisions you have put in place for loved ones and your wishes with regard to end of life care as well as your funeral and other related issues. The problem can be that the family never talk about death, it is skirted around, even joked about rather than engaged with seriously.

Kathryn Mannix, a palliative care physician for many decades writes “How can we talk about dying, plan our care or support those we love during their death, if we are not prepared to name death? Do you and your family avoid the D-words?” (Mannix p177)

What do we need to do:-

- Write a will, or make sure that your will is up to date with any relational changes.
- Appoint the executors of your will and ask them if they are willing to do it. Tell them where the will is kept.
- Talk to your family about the provisions of your will and avoid later disputes!
- Make sure that all the relevant documents are safe and accessible to those who need to know (information that is kept digitally can be a nightmare to retrieve if no one else knows the password!)
- Plan your own funeral, and/or memorial service down to hymns, readings, leader, speakers, flowers or no flowers, coffin present or not present and the ethos e.g. black and solemn or colours and joyful.
- You may want to appoint a specific funeral director and find out the approximate costings so that you can make sure that there are sufficient funds to cover the cost. Some families get into debt over paying for a loved ones funeral.
- Go through your papers and possessions. Have mercy on your executors and family in terms of what they will have to go through after you have died and make it as easy for them as you can. To have to deal with a cluttered house with a lifetime of hoarded belongings is both time consuming and distressing for those already dealing with their grief and loss.

Relational preparedness

- Seek for the restoration and reconciliation of broken relationships, where there may have been hurt, bitterness and resentment for many years. This is important for inner healing, spiritual growth and to re-establish family ties.
- We need to take responsibility for the hurt that we have caused others and to ask for their forgiveness. It may also be necessary, in confessing what we have done and the mistakes that we have made, to forgive ourselves and to see ourselves set free from the burden of guilt by the cross of Christ.

- We need to forgive and let go of anything that we hold against someone else both for our own freedom and because we, and they, will one day meet the one, who alone judges justly.
- This is an opportunity to value people more, to express our love for them, to tell them how much we appreciate them and are grateful for all they have done for us over the years.
- Some people, especially those who know that they will die while their children are still young, write letters for them to read as they get older and more able to understand, so that the child will know how much they loved them and to help them not to feel that they willingly abandoned them.

Re-ordering our priorities

“Facing our mortality sensitizes us to our life’s purpose: being prepared for what is to come has implications for how we are living now.....it sounds as a wakeup call to act on those changes we otherwise never quite get round to making.” (McGuinness p76)

Recognising that however long we live, our days are numbered, causes us to search for meaning and purpose in our use of the time we have left. We want to make a difference; to have a contribution that is of eternal value; to leave a legacy that is not just material.

“It is the fact that every day counts us down that makes each one such a gift. There are only two days with fewer than twenty-four hours in each lifetime, sitting like bookends astride our lives: one is celebrated every year, yet it is the other that makes us see living as precious.” (Mannix p17)

John Wyatt records the story of his friend Stuart, a young man dying of cancer and a very gifted musician. After having a lot of aggressive treatment that was not proving to be successful, he was transferred to the community palliative care team. Stuart was told that he had three months to live in which he would be reasonably pain free and at this point had to decide how he would use the time that he had left. He decided to use his last months to tell others about his faith. He sat down each day and faithfully wrote letters to his friends, family and fellow students about his trust in Christ and his hope of Heaven. He even made the mammoth effort to go to the students meeting to share his testimony with calmness, joy and hope.

Julia McGuinness writes about ordering our priorities “If quantity is limited, then quality has to count.....what is not in endless supply is used more effectively.” (p82) She would say that facing the reality of our own mortality can sharpen our focus on what really matters and indeed be life enhancing, leaving us free to embrace life more fearlessly.

“Since my youth, O God, you have taught me and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds.

Even when I an old and grey, do not forsake me, O

God,

till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to

come.”

Psalm 71:17-18

Spiritual Preparedness

“As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

Psalm 103:15-16

Life is extremely fragile and as we become aware of this we need to face the reality of our relationship with God and our hope in the life to come. We may have once been satisfied with a simple, unquestioning faith, which needs to be strengthened and matured to face the future with confidence. Mark Ashton, in his testimony, speaks of his surprise that when he shared the reality of his hope of heaven with fellow believers many of them were struggling to grasp the strength of that hope.

This could be a time of re-evaluating our faith and convictions in the light of times of suffering, loss or unanswered prayer. What do we genuinely believe about God and our eternal destiny? Do we have questions that need an answer but we are too afraid to ask them because of what people might think?

Maybe our Christian life has become little more than church on Sunday and our walk with God lies unattended until things go wrong and we have nowhere else to turn. Perhaps it is time to re-establish our relationship with Christ as Lord and our faith on the right foundations of obedience to his word, to revitalise our walk with him, so that our faith is strengthened and not lost when we need it most.

Packer writes of the danger that, as our bodies and minds slow down, we may be tempted to slow down spiritually. He sees the answer as “cultivating maximum zeal” which he defines as priority, passion and effort in pursuing God. C.H. Spurgeon also defined zeal this way “Zeal in religion is a burning desire to please God, to do his will, and to advance his glory in the world in every possible way...”

“Will you let death teach you the limitations of your life? Will you let it reshape your goals, your attitudes, the things you long for and work for and pray for and hope for the most.” (Gibson p89)

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. Therefore I do not run like a man aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” 1 Corinthians 9:25-27

Making the most of today

“Now listen you who say ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money’. Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life, you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” James 4:13-14

I don't think that the writer was condemning planning ahead wisely, but like the farmer who was building bigger barns, the problem was that it left God out of the equation and failed to recognise that 'today' is all we have and all that we can ultimately be certain of.

Some people use the phrase that "we should live each day as if it were our last", which has some truth to it, but the danger is that we end up in such a panic and distress over what could possibly be the best thing to do, that as a result we do nothing of value. It may be better to focus on keeping close to God day by day, seeking to please him and to serve him as he gives us opportunity and then to rest in him.

"Dying people, who truly know they are dying, are among all people most alive. They are not here to live for ever. They are here to live for now, for today – and most of all they are here to live with and for others." (Gibson p108)

Packer sees retirement as a watershed point for many people. That having left the world of work and possibly having been active in church work for many years, it is tempting to want to set our own agenda, to relax, to slacken the pace. We may think that it is time for us to give the responsibility and the organisation to others, who are younger and fitter while we take a back seat. Whereas others rejoice in the time that has been released to get involved in spiritual ministry in a way that was not possible when they were in full time work.

Packer condemns the fact that in some churches retirees are not seen as having a contribution; that they are no longer given responsibility in ministry or leadership, but expected only to support from the side lines while others do the ministry. He sees the danger that Satan can use that attitude to undermine, diminish and deflate our discipleship reducing us from labourers in Christ's kingdom to sympathetic spectators.

He would say that our spiritual and ministry gifts do not diminish with age, but they atrophy with disuse. He suggests that we should always be looking to *learn* and to *lead*, where leadership is seen as influence. On the whole, God takes the gifts and strengths that have been exercised and developed over many years and continues to use them; albeit our energy, pace and capacity may be diminished due to advancing age or health issues.

"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him." Psalm 92:14-15

Christian Hope in the face of Death

""Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 15:54-56

All the issues that we have considered with regard to our mortality; to the timing, means and circumstances of our own physical death pivot on this one fact – was Jesus Christ raised from the dead? If we have an unshakable belief and conviction in the resurrection of Christ and that by his sacrifice on the cross at Calvary, our sin has been dealt with once and for all, we have the hope of Heaven, which as the apostle Paul says is far better.

“If the death of Jesus Christ happened for us and he bore our hopelessness so that now we can have hope – and if the resurrection of Jesus Christ happened – then even the worst things will turn into the best things, and the greatest are yet to come.” (Keller p318)

For some of us, we have trusted God for our salvation and have a hope of Heaven, but it still seems a vague and mystical place in our imagination. John Chapman uses an overview of the teaching and ministry of the Lord Jesus in Mark’s gospel to give us some clues as to what the New Heaven and the New Earth will be like. This is just the headings and references:-

- Jesus is King (Mark 1:14-34)
- No more evil and sin (Mark 1:21-28)
- No more sickness (Mark 1:29-34)
- Total forgiveness (Mark 2:1-12)
- Satan will be totally overpowered (Mark 3:20-30)
- No more natural disasters (Mark 4:35-40)
- No more death (Mark 5:21-43)
- No more hunger (Mark 6:30-43,8:1-9)
- No more insignificant people (Mark 10:13-16)

“Heaven is a place where Jesus is King, and where under his rule there are no more tears or sorrow or disease or death; no more hunger or thirst or evil or sin.... Jesus entered our world, and showed us the kingdom in advance through his life, teaching, death and resurrection.” (Chapman p42)

Revelation chapter 21:3-4 describes the New Heaven in a similar way,

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning, crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.””

We thought right at the beginning that as it says in 1 Corinthians 15 death is the last enemy and thus we may shrink from it, but it is the last enemy to be *destroyed* through Christ’s victory on the cross, and it is in this that we set our hope.

“But it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.”

2 Timothy 1:10

This concluding verse and chorus of Stuart Townsend's great hymn "Oh, to see the dawn" captures something of the personal implications of Christ's death on the cross for each one of us and the freedom that is ours as a result:-

Oh, to see my name
Written in the wounds,
For through Your suffering I am free.
Death is crushed to death,
Life is mine to live,
Won through Your selfless love.

This, the power of the cross:
Son of God, slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.

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Points to Ponder:-

1. When did you become aware of your own mortality and what prompted that awareness?
2. How do you respond to the thought of death or dying?
3. What fears do you have?
4. Are they fears of death itself or of the process of dying?
5. What might help you do deal with these fears?
6. If you were to die tomorrow, what would remain unfinished?
7. What would you regret not having accomplished or experienced?
8. Do you identify with Mark Ashton's conclusion that the hardest loss to face would be relationships?
9. Perhaps it is not ultimate death that is a concern for you but rather the process of decline, loss of capacity and possible suffering due to ageing and/or chronic illness. How can you gain a more positive perspective as you think about the future?
10. How can you continue to live fruitfully, with meaning and purpose despite the limitations of ageing?
11. As John Chapman says "Not to plan for the inevitable is really foolish". What practical preparations have you already made or do you need to begin making?
12. Are you a family that avoids the "D-words"? What conversations do you need to broach with your family?
13. As you look back over your life are there relationships that need reconciliation, forgiveness to offer and forgiveness to seek?
14. How can you express love, appreciation and gratitude to family, friends and those who have had an impact on your life?
15. How does facing your own mortality cause you to re-evaluate your priorities?
16. How can you use the days that you have left, be they few or many, to make an eternal contribution and to leave a legacy that is not just material?
17. Is there a way that you can declare God's marvellous deeds to the next generation?
18. In the light of the fragility of our lives, how can we strengthen our priority, passion and effort in pursuing God?
19. Do you need to clarify your convictions and deepen your faith and hope of eternity?
20. In his letter to the Philippians Paul wrote that as he considered life and death "He desired to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better". What do you look forward to most?

