

We all live in slavery to the knowledge that we will die.

Faced with the knowledge that we have a limited span of days, human beings have always wrestled with what meaning our speck of existence could possibly have in the great arc of time, along with the billions of lives that have come and gone from this planet. Our lives while we are living them feel so huge, so full of passion and purpose and significance – a whole world, of which our consciousness is the centre. We feel so real, so important. And yet, at a certain point, our life will simply be extinguished. And for most of us, we go without record or note or any great legacy. We become simply a name – if we're lucky – in someone's genealogy research.

Most of us, especially in our younger years, resist this knowledge, because it's frightening. There's something strong within us that doesn't want to die – that recognises death as an enemy. So we deny it, push it far from our awareness, and live as though we have infinite tomorrows. Or, we dedicate ourselves to chasing immortality – through fame, art, or funding the research which may one day allow humans to upload our consciousness into a computer and live forever.

The reality of our own death acts on us, affecting our choices in ways we can't see or face. St Paul, in his incredible meditation on death and resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians, tells us that "*the sting of death is sin.*" Sin was not only the way death came into the world. It is also the *consequence of our consciousness of death*.¹ Or, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, our "slavery" to "the fear of death." Awareness of death creates *unacknowledged fear* in us, and the behaviours that are born of fear are grasping, hating, violence, and rejection of everything that reminds us that our bodies are weak and will fail.

¹ I'm grateful for the insights on this from Richard Beck's book *The Slavery of Death* which I rely on for the psychological research underpinning the next few paragraphs.

On a physical level, and especially when resources are scarce, we compete with one another for the things we need for our survival – food, shelter, and the means of production and security. But even when we are physically comfortable, the fear of death manifests as behaviours born of what Richard Beck calls “neurotic” anxieties. These are the things we do to ward off the awareness that we will one day die, and to suppress the lurking terror that in the overall scheme of things our existence, which is all we have, is unseen and pointless.

We try to cheat death by living successful, unblemished, uncontaminated lives in accordance with whatever cultural script shapes our definition of a good life. This takes different forms, but in our contemporary Western culture often includes the pursuit of physically perfect and successful lives – a beautiful house, sending our kids to the “right” schools, a career we can feel proud to tell people about, and injecting botox into our faces. We refuse to talk about death even to plan our funeral with our loved ones. Our health system is geared towards prolonging life, and we systematise the rejection from polite society of people whose embodied reality confronts us, because of disfigurement, smell or visible suffering.

The drive to live a good life on the terms set for us by our culture is not sinful in itself, but the pursuit of it at all costs, driven by unacknowledged fear, quickly becomes idolatrous. And, because we are unable to tolerate lack or weakness, we can become indifferent – even hateful and violent – towards those whose “otherness” or dysfunction provokes our fear of death.

When we fall short of whatever our culture says is noble, or worthwhile, the feeling of failure can be catastrophic. This is made worse by other people’s rejection – which is what people do to avoid being contaminated by someone else’s failure. Rejection is experienced in our bodies’ physical pain receptors – it hurts like a physical wound because it makes us vulnerable to exclusion, which means separation from what we need to survive either physically or emotionally.

Who then, as St Paul asks in Romans, will rescue me from this body of death?

In our Gospel reading we learn that it had been revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. The very elderly prophet Anna waited in the temple to see redemption for her people. Both of these servants of God, in tune with God's Holy Spirit, did not measure their lives' significance by what they did or didn't do, but *received their lives and their purpose* from a God who wanted them to bear witness to the coming salvation through Jesus Christ.

When they saw this boy who was brought to the temple by his parents they recognised the saviour who had come to "destroy the one who has the power of death...and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death."

Looking at Jesus, the child of Mary, the child of God, they could see redemption, not only for themselves, not only for Israel, but for the world – for all humanity. "A light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel."

See what this meant to the aging Simeon. He took the child in his arms, and praised God, his first words being to *welcome his own death in peace of heart*, assured of salvation, assured that the bondage of his people – and of all people – was coming to an end. In the old fashioned and lovely words of the Nunc Dimitis, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word."

According to your word. The word for all of us who live in the light of Christ's death and resurrection is that death has no hold on us, and is nothing to fear. Because of Jesus Christ, we are assured not only of the eternal significance, worth and value of each one of our lives, but we know that death cannot cheat us out of our life, which is held in God. The power of the world, the flesh and the devil, which is the power of death, is destroyed.

We do not make or break our own lives, much as we try to, with our slavish determination to keep death at bay on our own terms. Instead, we receive our lives each day as a gift from God, who holds and keeps and mends and restores and guides them. In the Spirit, we fulfil – sometimes well, sometimes poorly – the tasks that are ours to do. We bear witness to everything that has been given to us to see and experience. We offer praise and direct our attention, our hearts, towards the source of our life and worship. And, when we breathe our last, we go on in God.

We will face judgement, yes. But there is nothing ultimately to fear from that judgement, painful as it may be. The One who came to his temple as a baby came to free all of us who are held in slavery by the fear of death. Perfect love, in the end, casts out fear.

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, and assures us that, when the time comes, we, his servants, can depart in peace.