

Is anyone talking about life after death?

I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting – Amen.

So ends the Apostles creed recited faithfully by millions of Christians week by week over the centuries – but do we really believe it? Over recent weeks during the Covid19 pandemic Church of England leaders appear to have had little to say about death, except how to avoid it. Of course, it's never easy to get this right. If a Bishop were to speak out on this, one could only imagine the chorus of angry dismissals across the media. Charges of 'pie in the sky when you die' and irrelevance would no doubt rain down on the unfortunate Bishop's head. Solidarity with the nation and the lockdown is the challenge of the hour.

This is understandable but it is interesting to note that in other periods of plague and mortal illness, ministers have administered the sacraments to the sick and dying and buried the dead without regard for their own safety. In his seminal book, 'The Rise of Christianity', Rodney Stark (Professor of Sociology at Washington University) commented that during the terrible urban plagues of the first two centuries it was Christians who cared for the sick and dying in the city often at the cost of their own lives. It was one of the reasons why Christianity triumphed in the Roman Empire over the older paganism through its practices of compassion and justice.

The Church's caution is but a reflection of the dread of death which is so real in our culture. And it's not surely just the process of dying that many dread, it's the palpable terror of personal annihilation. Its here where it seems today the Christian voice is just simply absent as though a vivid belief in the reality of the life to come has become an embarrassment. When a respected Christian leader argues that all the Church has to offer at a time like this is to follow the Psalmists in hopeless lament, I think there is a problem. Yes, often the Church wants to produce quick easy answers, and is uncomfortable with lament. We need to lament at what Covid19 is doing to our world – but is that it?

Do we stop there? Sometimes it seems we are being asked to choose between working for a better world now and rejecting hope of heaven or holding onto heaven because things will only get worse here. But surely this is a false choice.

The Christian faith exploded into the ancient world because of two key beliefs- the reality of resurrection because of the victory won by Jesus Christ and the preciousness to God of each individual person. It is this which made it revolutionary. For St Paul, the heart of the good news he preached was about our 'Saviour Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' (2 Timothy 1 v 10)

If the Church of England has no good news to spread about death, has it any good news at all?

Ross