

WEEKLY SERMON

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To die is gain

It's probable that MPs will be given a free vote on the issue of assisted suicide at some stage in this parliament. And no doubt much will be said about everyone's desire to die a "good death". But what exactly do we mean by a "good death"? For many the chief wish would be for suffering to be kept to an absolute minimum – and understandably so.

But as is often the case with important moral questions, Christians would have a different priority. In Paul's letter to the Philippians we have these memorable words written by the apostle: "for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (1:21)

Clearly Paul loved living the Christian life – "to live is Christ". He rejoiced that he belonged to Christ and Christ belonged to him; he rejoiced that he had lived a life devoted to the service of Christ. True, living for Christ had brought Paul many hardships and much sacrifice – as he writes this letter to the Philippians yet again he finds himself in chains – but Paul knew that even the Roman emperor couldn't take away his freedom to know and love Christ.

But the verse also reminds us that for the Christian Christ has prepared something even better beyond this life – "to die is gain." After death Paul was expecting to experience a yet deeper grasp of Christ's love and adoration for him. Paul is probably describing this future hope in 1 Corinthians 13 where he writes, "then we shall see face to face... then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (v12)

So Paul explains to his Philippian readers that he happily finds himself in a win win situation. If his life continues then that's great because "this will mean fruitful labour for me." (Philippians 1:22) On the other hand, if his life ends imminently then that will bring about his deep desire "to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." (1:23)

And so Paul was ready to die and to die well. He wants all Christians to think as he does. (I always smile at a verse that comes later in the letter where Paul unashamedly tells us that he knows better than anyone and that we should pray for our thoughts to fall in line with his: "if on some point you think differently (to me), that too God will make clear to you." (3:15))

"No one is ready to live until they are ready to die." That was certainly true of Paul, may it also be true of us.

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