

Mark 8:27 - 9:1 Assisted Dying

On Tuesday morning, I read *The Guardian*. Now I like *The Guardian*, but there are days when it does not feel as though *The Guardian* likes me. Tuesday was one of those days. There was a headline. *The Problem with Religious People*. *The Guardian* had the decency to stick a question mark after it as though there might be some discussion. So it read *The Problem with Religious People?* But, as the headline continued, *They always think they are right*, it didn't make my toast easier to swallow. Then *The Guardian* turned the knife, there was a second article about religious people. This was really not going to be my day. One journalist annoyed by religious opinion and another about religious opinion that pretends it's not religious. Both articles prompted by the assisted dying bill that went to the House of Commons on Friday. Life, and death, and telling the truth. Before I had finished my toast and marmalade on Tuesday morning I knew what I would be preaching about today.

Now, life and death and telling the truth takes a little bit of explaining. One thing needs to follow another. Let's start with telling the truth. On holiday I read a novel by Colm Toibin, *Norah Webster*. I recommend it strongly, but I admit it may not be the novel you want when you have just put on your linen shirt, sat in the sun, and ordered a glass of prosecco. It is not, to begin with, a cheering novel. I am not giving the game away if I tell you that *Norah Webster* is recently widowed and everyone around her is determined not to talk about death. Her in-laws do not talk about death, her children do not talk about death and neither does she. As a priest, I have spent hours with people who graduate *summa cum laude* in not talking about stuff. To be honest, Mrs Hoyle would tell you I am not averse to a bit of studied silence myself. Avoiding the issue is a very English bad habit. Even the church does it. Famously, in 1975 we declared there was no theological objection to the ordination of women. That was odd because quite a lot of people thought there were some pretty serious theological objections and we seriously skewed our conversation because, after 1975, we kept pretending we were not talking theology.

In the debate about assisted dying there has been a similar failure to talk about the theology. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been a significant and effective voice in the debate. He has also pitched his argument carefully. Our bishops have opposed the assisted dying legislation for two reasons. First, the bishops believe human life is precious and it should be cherished. Second, the dying are vulnerable and, the argument goes, this legislation will make them more vulnerable. Now those are good and interesting arguments, but they are not very *theological* arguments. Look at the statement on assisted dying and you will find no scriptural text, no quotation from tradition, no mention of God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.

And that is why, *The Guardian*, on Tuesday, could say two quite different things about 'Religious People'. We got clobbered for telling everyone what to think because our bishops do indeed oppose the legislation. And we also got lambasted by Polly Toynbee (for it was she) because we pretend we are not being religious at all.

Now I am about to say something I do not say all that often. I think Polly Toynbee may be right. There, I said it. I think Polly Toynbee may be right. She suggests we are being deliberately devious and I do not accept that. But, I do think a religious argument should sound religious. Let's go back to *Norah Webster*. Why do you not talk about something even when you know it is important? Well in *Norah Webster* people do not talk because

they know they are bound to disagree. It is going to be difficult and awkward and inconclusive so no one bothers. And it is precisely for that reason that religion is beginning to get parked to one side of our national life. We can't use religious language because we know, before we even begin, that words will never persuade. Our Archbishop knows that if he sounds religious his argument will be discounted. An atheist, a liberal, and a fundamentalist went into a bar... but they all sat at different tables so nothing happened. Even the Church has stopped using religious language. Faith is suffocating in an isolation ward.

That means that we end up not talking about the big difficult things at all. We argue about detail. So the arguments around the assisted dying bill are not arguments about what life is for and or about what a good death is like; the argument is not even really about our rights, and whether I have a right to die as I wish. Instead, we argue about numbers (how many people support a change), or practicalities, or about vulnerable people. Those things matter, but they are only part of a very significant conversation about what we say about our own lives and our own deaths that should range wider.

What might the religious argument be? There was a clue in the gospel this morning. Jesus goes with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. That is significant, the place matters, they are on the border between pagan territory and the place of promise. The border is the place where you do identity checks. And that is what we get. *Who do you say that I am?* It is the question in the gospels. Who is Jesus? Just what do you meet when you meet Jesus? The answers are a muddle, Elijah? John the Baptist? The Messiah.

Strange answers to the question, *Who do you say that I am?* Elijah was a prophet already more than a thousand years dead when Jesus walked into Caesarea Philippi. John the Baptist was a radical quoting ancient texts, and the *Messiah*, well that was a tricky term, tied up with hope for the future, religious revival and political reform. What I want you to notice is that when the question is 'Who is Jesus?' the answer has to do with politics and borders and a very, very long history that has gone before. This is the bit we really need to get straight. This is the religious bit. Religious answers are big answers, never just the detail.

Asked the question 'Who am I?' quite a lot of us answer with personal information. I am the Dean, I live in Bristol. I read poetry, I like long walks, Palestrina and claret. I might continue by telling you I am married, I have children, I am English and Anglican. That is the way we think of ourselves, my identity has something to do with what I do and what I think and something to do with the groups I belong to. And Jesus is not like that. Thinking about human life we think about ourselves and about the groups we belong to. We think about *this* life and *these* lives of people like me. In Jesus though, there is no *me* and *you*, no *them* and *us*. In Jesus life is for Jews *and* Samaritans, for slave *and* free, for male *and* female. In Jesus the story began a long time ago and includes Elijah, and the end of the story is out of sight in the future. We define our lives by leaving a lot out, all the things we cannot cope with. Jesus refused to do that, utterly refused. His life was lived without recourse to power or the flight into fear. Jesus shows us what life can be. That is the big religious insight, it is pretty well the only, religious insight. To be religious is just to know that the story is not about me. We make life a possession, the debate about assisted suicide is about our mounting determination to define ourselves. Parliament is invited to declare that I am the choices I make. I am my own possession. Religion argues that my life is not my possession, it is a gift and that I will be most myself when I stop thinking about what I can make of

myself and start thinking about what I have been given by God, and by my relationship with you and with rest of creation.

The gospel reading ended with one of the more alarming sayings of Jesus. *Those who want to save their life will lose it.* The defined, defended life, the life that I try to possess, will betray me. I will die. In fact, the more I define and defend, the more determined I am to have this and not that, be like this, and not that, to know him and not her the less alive I will be. That's what religion teaches. That is the christian faith.

Does that resolve all the difficulty. No of course it does not. I struggle with the horror of painful degrading terminal illness. I am a priest I have seen it. Does religion make it better? No, not always. We will continue to struggle with very difficult questions about how we deal with the extremes of suffering. But that is what the conversation should be about the extremes of suffering. Because we are not prepared to talk about what life is and what death means we blunder close to clumsy laws and an attempt to calm our fears raises new terrors for the weakest amongst us.

Jesus stands before us asking *Who do you say that I am?* He asks us to see that, here, before us is life – life in all its fullness; life undefended. Here is life lived without borders or boundary; here is life as a gift. Here is life as the everlasting gift of love. *Who do you say that I am?*