

Candlemas

2019

Sermon preached at Magdalen College Chapel

The Revd James Crockford

Hebrews 2.14-end

Luke 2.22-40

If you should choose to become a member of the Alcor Life Extension Foundation, when your body eventually gives up the ghost, it will not darken the doors of a church, nor go anywhere near a crematorium kiln. For members of the Alcor Life Extension Foundation, the newly deceased body will go into a steel cask filled with ice, before gradually undergoing a process of being frozen to less than minus sixty-five degrees Celsius. You'll then be transported to Arizona – a little ironic given its climate – where you'll be stored indefinitely in a vat of liquid nitrogen.

All you have to do to access such a remarkable set of services is part with \$200,000, along with an annual contribution of \$180. If that sounds somewhat beyond your means, for just \$18,000 Alcor will cut off, freeze and store your head.

Cryonics, the practice of freezing the body in such a way that it might one day be defrosted and revived, perhaps even cured, is a pretty extreme vision of future existence: it is, we might think, a thick end of the wedge, the crisis of a society that struggles to face up to the reality and finality of death.

At the thinner end of that wedge, there is a shifting language around the realm of death – we no longer have corpses, we may perhaps have bodies, but we are equally likely to refer to the body as if it were still John or Pamela or Stephen. And poor John or Pamela or Stephen have not died, they might have deceased, maybe passed away, or crossed over, or expired, or simply fallen asleep. They're not gone, they're just in the next room, we tell ourselves, or up in the stars watching over us, always with us.

As a vocabulary this is nothing very new; we twist the terms to capture something less brutal, something richer and more suggestive; we don't always need to be hit by the blunt reality of death.

Yet put together with this allergy to words of finality the pervasive tendency to try always to extend life, to keep going longer, and the shame and silence about the realities of aging and weakening bodies, the slick marketability of smiling, confident youth and vitality, and we probably have a problem, an aversion to owning up to our own mortality. The writer to the Hebrews describes the fear of death as a kind of slavery, and in a way all fears are a form of captivity. In contrast, the words of the prophet Simeon when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple ring with freedom and contentment. They are words we sing and hear at each Evensong: Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. Simeon is content at last to die.

To depart in peace seems to summarise most of what we may hope the end may be; yet often the prospect of pain, of confusion, of having to keep living even when we feel ready to go, of complications in medical care and comfort, the likelihood of regrets, or of plain unreadiness: all these crowd out the prospect of peace, and so we get anxious. It may not be an anxiety we acknowledge or realise, but it plays out in the vision we live by of a good life, frantically hoping life will just keep going, and procrastinating in the face of death's reality.

For both the writer to the Hebrews, and the prophet Simeon, what releases us from the fear of death is Christ in his humanity. For the writer to the Hebrews, Christ in human flesh shares our testing and our suffering, even our death. For Simeon, it is seeing and holding the baby Jesus that releases him from waiting, from holding off from death, and he knows then he can go in peace, for the light to all peoples has come and brightened the dark with light that cannot fade.

For both, it is not that Jesus cheats death, or mortality, or that Christ offers us some escape-strategy from the pain and complexity of our broken bodies and fading minds; but that Christ goes through death, with all the decay and degeneration it involves, in order to break it; he takes on our mortality in order that we may fear it no longer.

One of the most remarkable things about death-beds, about sitting with the dying, is the palpable sense of presence: it is terrible, in the truest sense of the word, and you can tell everything – every person, every word, every pain, every fear – means so much. It sometimes takes death, or the prospect of it, to teach us wonder and truth, depth and beauty, to show us just how much a human person can mean. It is sometimes by facing death, without fear, that we can know how to live; by embracing our limits and our liabilities, that we can finally learn to be ourselves, and to be free.

At Candlemas, we see the bookends of life – the cute little face of the baby Jesus, with all its possibility and life and potential, and the final sigh of the old man Simeon, content to go to rest. These two belong together, for now at least: to live life in the light of death, and to die in the light of a life that lightens all our darkness, and will never be overcome.