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Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

Forward into life.

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We find it relatively easy to reflect on death. We encounter mortal death in the media every day, and also the death of despair and alienation. We all have our version of death in this second sense. We know about the things that trap us only too well. But because of what Paul says in Corinthians: *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied*, it seemed good to reflect on something we don't often speak about openly: the meaning of death as the end of mortal life.

In 1838 Pastor Augustus Kavel (1798 - 1860) led the first group of Lutherans to Australia in search of religious freedom. He died in Tanunda and on his gravestone is written: *[After his stroke] he entered into the joy of his Lord. Here he rests, until he shall stand in his allotted place at the end of the days*. This is a fine piece of Lutheran theology, forged out of the many currents of Reformation and Counter Reformation thought. Its context is a long history of the changing understanding of death in the bible, and the church.

In the Old Testament humans are understood to be part of the natural order, not the heavenly realm. Humans are irreducibly physical and although animated by the breath of God we perish like the beasts, and wither and fade like the grass. Although some parts of the bible refer to God taking back the life sustaining breath that animates us, this does not equate with the Greek idea of the Soul separating from the body. The Hebrew emphasis was on the historical relationship - the covenantal bond - between God and the whole people of God. While death was seen as a hostile force, which undercut this relationship, the Psalmist is notable for proclaiming that God's power extends **beyond** the limits of this life. In only two places (Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:1) does the Old Testament begin to develop the notion of a future hope, but the resounding message is that, alive or dead, we are in the hands of God.

During the Intertestamental period the idea of a resurrection and a future life gained in currency. A related trend was that some Hebrew thinkers began to abandon the Hebrew view of life for the Greek idea that humans are made up of a body and an immortal soul. The theology and liturgies of the church are still affected by both these notions.

By New Testament times death was still seen as both a concrete reality, and symbolic one. It was a hostile force, the last enemy, which broke down our relationship with God. As to what happens to us when we die, there were at least four different views. The Sadducees viewed death as personal extinction. The Pharisees believed in a literal, bodily resurrection at the Last Day. The Essenes taught the immortality of the soul. And the Qumran Community taught resurrection without any resuscitation of the body - a mode of existence in which people will be like angels in heaven.

The theme which is central to the New Testament, and which transformed the attitude towards death of the Disciples and the early Christians, is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* The discussion in Paul's letter to the Corinthians revolves around what is implied by the proclamation of the Easter faith. For Paul this is not just a matter of opinion about an episode in Jesus' personal life. It is something that comes from the future that God offers us, and flows over into the lives of all believers. It has implications for how believers are to act, and how life in the world is to be understood. What happened was a demonstration of God's new act of faithfulness to the covenant. Despite our rejection of Jesus, God moved among us to bringing us into a new, life giving relationship through him who had died. The resurrection is not a new philosophy; it is an action of God which reveals that Jesus went before us into life. It declares God is not estranged from us. Jesus died, but from that death flowed a gift we did not deserve or expect. To affirm or deny what is shown to us here is to affirm or deny our own participation in the Easter faith. As Paul witnessed in his own life, the resurrection experience gave believers a sense of certainty, which reached beyond earlier hopes for life after death. And we well know how, during the early centuries, Christians became renowned for their fearlessness in the face of death. It was not their personal survival that was at stake. It was the unshakeability of their trust that God has chosen to offer us a relationship and a future, and will not abandon us in death.

From the sixth century the positive outlook of the early years was overtaken by a more sinister emphasis on judgement, purgatory and hell. By the middle-ages **fear** of death was the dominant concern of Christian Spirituality, subverting the impact of God's grace. An important motivation in Luther's journey to faith was the church's use of this fear, and its exploitation of people through the complicated ideas around the soul's departure to hell or purgatory. What his work did was to recover the biblical emphasis on God's gift of grace, which undercut the focus on fear and the need gain eternal life by our efforts. Despair and alienation remained potential threats. Mortality remained the end of a natural process in life. But the note of hope as the gift of God was restored, pushing aside concern with our merits. The proclamation of what God had done for us in Jesus Christ was the basis for saying death has no more dominion over us.

We know that the modern world is that is still very interested in death and the question of the after-life. There is little overt fear of death as in the mediaeval period, but it is there, as an existential question about the limits to life, and as the fear of meaninglessness, which drives so many human actions. At the same time the classic Christian hope has been seriously questioned by modern scientific thought which disputes the existence of the soul, and the possibility of resurrection. Christian and secularist both see death as the end of a natural process. What Christian hope means is still a matter of faith.

As reflected in Pastor Kavel's gravestone at Tanunda, Luther's view was that at death we rest until the last day. There are many views of death even in the New Testament, and we are not saved by choosing the right one. We are saved by God's choice, which is to demonstrate divine forgiveness towards us, confirmed by God in raising Jesus, after we did all we could to destroy him. This proclamation is God's new act. It is the first fruit which foreshadows what God seeks for the world, and in this hope we may safely live and die.

Martin Luther said: *if I were to die tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today*. The graphic on the Order of Service reflects Jeremiah's picture of two trees. The first, a shrub in the desert, represents those who trust only in human strength and care nothing for God. They struggle always for resources and life. The second represents those who trust in God. They are like a tree that is planted by the water. Adversity is met with resources. Fear and anxiety is banished, and fruitfulness is the mark of its days. The question is, where would we choose to stand? The answer is made somewhat easier for people of faith. They would stand near the place where God has stood with us. It is marked by a strange shaped tree, which to many is a sign of despair and death. But to the eyes of faith, the Cross of Christ is the tree of life. It gives us the basis for hoping, not only for this life, but for the gift of life that is to come. This is ours. We go forward, not into death, but into life. Thanks be to God.