

TRINITY 20'24

I guess this line from today's Epistle sums up well what both Readings are encouraging us to think about and act upon:

“All are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.”

That is not just true for a prisoner or warmonger. Although, just to say in passing, it is not news for any of us that our prisons are overcrowded and at breaking point or, that some Heads of State are acting like oligarchs who have never heard of the 10 Commandments ...

What the writer of Hebrews and St Mark are preaching, if you like, is that we are all accountable for our actions and decision-making, our sense of right and wrong, our ethical behaviour or lack of it, to work for the common good and value each life as sacred, made in the image of God.

A few weeks ago I had my first ever letter to the Church Times published to say how worried I was that the Hospice movement is hopelessly underfunded and putting ever more pressure on the thousands of volunteer fundraisers who have to reach almost unattainable targets on a weekly basis. I implied that this great Christian institution founded by Dame Cicely Saunders needs to be integrated within a public NHS and palliative care should be a natural component part of all of that. And next to my letter was, ironically, one from one of my teachers, way back – on assisted suicide.

I know how sensitive and difficult this one is but I am desperately worried that there seems to be a sudden rush to push this swiftly through Government by so-called 'open' debate which could become law before Christmas.

Whether by an influential private Members Bill or an indefatigable Esther Rantzen – there surely has to be some reference to Scripture and Theology? I suggest these disciplines are sorely lacking in our public life and legal, state-sanctioned assisted suicide would be the most profound ethical change in our legislation for decades. As Christians, I believe we must speak up and articulate to our MP, Jenny, why we believe this to be wrong.

Here are just a few thoughts which come to mind:

1. If assisted suicide is legalised, it will fundamentally alter the ethical fabric of our society and change the doctor/patient relationship, destroying the historic bond of trust that has existed.
2. Vulnerable people would feel pressured to end their lives for fear of being a burden. And legislation could become more permissive over time, as has been the case in other countries.
3. This issue makes us think about how we value human life, and the message we send to the most frail and vulnerable members of our community.
4. The disability campaigner and actor Liz Carr has said: "As long as there is deep inequality, and certain people's lives are

viewed as less valuable, then to have state-assisted death isn't safe for the likes of me and other disabled people.”

5. This is not simply about opposing something. We have a better story for our society. We urgently need greater investment in palliative care, and other life-affirming forms of support that uphold the inherent dignity and value of people.

I feel sure some of you will be thinking this sounds like ‘hectoring’ as one of my friends was accused back in theological college, trying out one of his earliest of sermons!

My apologies if you think that.

I can only say, personally, how today's readings reflect something of the urgency about a core Gospel message – even if it contradicts popular ‘messaging’ by so-called ‘celebrities’. As Our Lord reminds us:

“Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”