

# Assisted Dying 2 - an Anglican perspective

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- [ 0 : 00 ]     So in this second session I'm going to attempt to give a Christian reflection on assisted dying with specific and deliberate focus on what we as Anglicans believe and why we believe that and how that fits within the worldwide communion.
- We are after all reflecting on a very deeply human question. It's one that attempts to grasp life, death and our relationship with God.
- Now as Christians particularly within the Anglican tradition we seek to approach this with prayerful hearts guided by scripture, tradition and reason as Dave has set out.
- This is how we as Anglicans attempt to engage with any question of theology and therefore moral direction. These three pillars help us navigate the complexities of life whilst remaining rooted in the love and the truth of Christ.
- So we'll start with scripture and where else would we start but in Genesis. But before I get into the scripture I hope you'll notice as I walk through this talk whether I'm referring to tradition or to reason there are many references to scripture.
- [ 1 : 22 ]     And if it would be helpful I can provide a list of all of these references and indeed the quotes from the church fathers and so on via email. In fact if you would like my notes you'll be very welcome to them.
- So Genesis chapter 1 verse 27. We're told that God has created us in his own image. And it isn't just a poetic flourish which of course Genesis has many of but it is a profound statement about our worth.
- Every person from the frailest newborn to the elderly nearing their final breath bears the imprint of God. Life then from the very start of scripture is sacred.
- A gift entrusted to us by God. The Psalms echo this in one of the most beautiful phrases. For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb.
- Psalms 139. From conception to natural death our existence is held in God's hands. This sanctity of life has long shaped Christian thought and moral direction.
- [ 2 : 39 ]     It's right there in the Ten Commandments. You shall not murder. That's Exodus 20.13. It stands as a clear boundary. Historically Christians have understood this to mean that we don't have the authority to take life.
- Either our own or another person's. Because it belongs to God. Now that starts to give us the tradition element of our Anglican theological exploration.
- So taking scripture and holding it against tradition. We inevitably start with the church fathers. It's important to understand what we mean when we say tradition. Tradition isn't.
- Well we've always done it this way. Tradition is knowing which berries will kill you. Tradition is hard won generational knowledge.
- And wisdom. It is not. Well we always use incense. So we're going to have incense. Don't confuse those two things.
- [ 3 : 46 ]     Now. Church fathers. We can go all the way back to the very earliest church fathers. We'll start with Augustine. Who argued that even in suffering. Life remains a thing to be cherished.

Not a burden. To be discarded. For Anglicans. This reverence of life. Is reaffirmed in our liturgy. Where of course we hold our doctrine.

We pray for the sick. The suffering. And the dying. Entrusting them to God's King. But believe it or not. We can go back further in Christian tradition.

Than even the creation of the Church of England. And Anglican theology. So let's return to Augustine. He remains one of the most influential church fathers.

And provides the clearest early Christian stance. Against suicide and assisted dying. Which extends in many forms. We pick it up in the City of God.

[ 4 : 43 ] Book 1. Chapter 17 to 27. If you are interested. I urge you to read the City of God. It will blow your mind. He is responding to the Roman practice of suicide.

As an honourable escape. Particularly women taking their lives. To avoid rape during war. He argues that life is a gift from God.

And to end it. Even in extreme circumstances. Usurps God's prerogative. He cites the fifth commandment. You shall not murder. Murder. Interpreting it to include self-murder.

He writes. It is not without significance. That in no passage of the holy canonical books. They can be found either divine precept. Or permission. To take away our own life.

Whether for the sake of entering into a better life. Or of escaping any evils. For Augustine. Suffering does not justify ending life.

[ 5 : 47 ] It is instead an opportunity for patience and trust in God. If we apply this to assisted suicide.

His logic suggests that aiding someone to die. However compassionate the intent. Still violates the divine order. As it involves human hands in an act reserved for God.

But we can go back even further than Augustine. Let's pick up Tertullian. Who was writing between the second and third centuries. This was written in about the year 180 AD.

He emphasised the sanctity of the body and life as God's creation. In On the Soul. Chapter 56. I don't recommend it.

It's hard going. But for your notes. On the Soul. Chapter 56. He's critiquing pagan attitudes towards death. Asserting that Christians must endure suffering.

[ 6 : 48 ] Rather than flee it through suicide. He's rather more blunt about it than Augustine is. But he has a beautiful language of life as stewardship. And not as a possession to discard.

To Tertullian's focus on martyrdom is telling. He praised Christians who faced death at the hands of persecutors. But never endorsed self-inflicted death.

Even under duress. His writings imply a rejection of any act. Assisted or not. That prematurely ends life. Rooting this in the belief.

That God alone determines our span. That's Job chapter 14 verse 5. But can we push even further back than that?

Well yes. Believe it or not. We can. We can turn to the writings of Clement of Alexandria. Now Clement. I don't know who Clement was. But Clement. Was a teacher in the very early church.

[ 7 : 50 ] And he addressed suicide. Although indirectly through his ethical teachings. In The Instructor. He stresses that Christians should live according to God's will.

And he writes a huge amount about enduring life's trials with faith. And he contrasts Christian patience with stoic acceptance of suicide.

Arguing that taking one's life reflects despair. Not virtue. He writes. To flee from life. Is to flee from God.

Who is the giver of life. And whilst he doesn't explicitly mention assistance in dying. His framework leaves little room for it. Aiding somebody to flee from God.

Would be seen as complicity in sin. Undermining the call to bear one another's burdens. Where do we hear that? Bearing one another's burdens. Galatians chapter 6 verse 2.

[ 8 : 50 ] We bear one another's burdens through care. Not through termination. Why am I spending so much time on tradition.

And the early church fathers. Well because as I sat and wrote this. I realised how similar their context was. To the one we find ourselves in today. The church fathers were writing in a Greco-Roman world.

Where suicide was often culturally accepted. Whether as stoic self-mastery. A noble exit. Or a means to avoid dishonour.

Against this. They asserted a counter-cultural ethic. Life's value isn't contingent on comfort. Honour or unity.

But on its origins in God. They saw suffering as part of the human condition. The human condition. Redeemable through Christ's own suffering.

[ 9 : 49 ] That's 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 21. This didn't mean that they ignored pain. They advocated care for the sick. But they rejected hastening death as a solution.

And they also lacked the modern context of terminal illness. And advanced medical technology. Which complicates assisted dying debates today.

Where is that life? Yet their principles remain relevant. Life's sanctity. God's sovereignty. And the call to perseverance.

For instance. Jerome. Writing in the middle of the. When did he write this? So. It would have been about 410. So just the beginning of the 5th century.

In his letters. He praises those who endure illness bravely. Suggesting that assisting someone to die. Will rob them of a final act of faithfulness.

[ 10 : 47 ] So not only are you committing a sin. But you are robbing somebody. Of a final act of faithfulness. From the father's perspective.

And from the perspective of every major theologian since. Up to and including Rowan Williams. Assisted suicide. Is seen as morally unacceptable.

It involves intentional cooperation in ending a life. Which they definitely view as a grave sin. Both for the person dying. And for the one assisting.

Their focus on God's authority over death. Let's take for example Deuteronomy 32-39. I kill and I make alive. Their focus leaves no space for humans to assume that role.

Even out of mercy. Instead they'd urge compassionate care. Prayer and trust in God's timing. Echoing Job's resilience. Shall we receive good from God?

[ 11 : 52 ] And shall not receive evil? Job 2-10. We live in a world of pain. We always have. Assisting dying arises from a cry of pain that we can't ignore.

The cry of those who suffer horribly. Who feel their dignity is stripped away by illness or disability. As Christians we're not deaf to that cry.

Now or throughout our history. Anglican theology specifically calls us to compassion. Modelled on Jesus himself. We hear it in the funeral liturgy. We hear about Jesus who wept at Lazarus' tomb.

The book of common prayer urges us to comfort and relieve those in need. So then, how do we balance this compassion with the belief that life is sacred?

How do we take this heavy load of scripture and tradition which cry out against the sin of assisted suicide and start to apply it to the world around us using reason?

[ 12 : 57 ] As in so much of life, the answer is to turn to the cross. Jesus' suffering wasn't meaningless. It was redemptive.

In his agony, he entered fully into human pain. Showing us that even in our darkest moments, God is present. For Christians, suffering can be a mystery we don't fully understand.

But it is not outside of God's love. St. Paul tells us, We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.

And endurance produces character. And character produces hope. Romans 5, 3-4 As we move towards the start of Lent, we are called to consider our characters in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ.

We are called to the difficult, to the painful, and to the complex nature of simply living in this fallen world. Now please hear me when I say this isn't to glorify pain and suffering, but to point us towards its transformation in Christ.

[ 14 : 16 ] Assisted dying cuts short that process. Choosing individual control over trusting God's timing. But let's be honest.

Not everybody finds the Christian position on assisted dying satisfying or helpful. Modern medicine can prolong life in ways the biblical writers never imagined.

Sometimes extending suffering beyond what seems bearable. Advocates of assisted dying often speak of dignity. Preserving a person's autonomy to choose when and how they die.

As Anglicans, we value reason. And we can see the logic here. If somebody is terminally ill, in unrelenting pain, shouldn't they have that choice?

Indeed, that is the argument of those Christians who support assisted dying. Amongst them, an ex-archbishop of Canterbury and a chaplain to the House of Commons. George Carey and Rosie Harper both argue that, in George Carey's words, it is profoundly Christian to do all we can to ensure nobody suffers against their wishes.

[ 15 : 33 ] Or in Rosie Harper's words, I support Faulconer's bill, really out of the depths of my faith. I think he comes down to what sort of God you believe in. I believe in a God who is compassionate and who essentially offers us free will.

Both of these statements fly in the face of both Scripture and what Christians have embraced, the wisdom of over 2,000 years.

That somehow, if we believe in God, he will remove our pain. And if he isn't powerful enough to do this, then we must do it ourselves. It is a philosophy which finds its home in the early Gnostic heresy.

The Gnostics were rejected from the church in the early 2nd century because they believed, amongst quite a lot of other weird things, that our individual nature was what made us divine.

That it was not God who saved us, but our own natures. Interestingly, this form of thought re-emerges in the Enlightenment, where we start to understand ourselves as fully formed and complete.

[ 16 : 47 ] Think Descartes, cogito ergo sum, which of course means, I think, therefore I am. Gold stars. I avoided Greek in this, but I couldn't leave the Latinx.

In that philosophy, we are all that we need to be, and only need God as some sort of external guide, rather than as our creator who knit us together in our mother's wombs, and teaches us all that we need through Scripture, and through interrogating that Scripture across 2,000 years, as a body of people, as a church.

This idea that a compassionate God who would not allow us to suffer pain is a faith that is shallow, and lacks any sort of intelligent reason.

On a personal note, I find it very difficult to take moral guidance from a man who has had his office taken from him, and is currently undergoing disciplinary action, for failing to act when he was aware of the most awful abuse of young men and women in the church by people he was personally responsible for.

He and Rosie Harper do not speak from a place of reason, or indeed of dignity, but of, perhaps, understandable fear.

[ 18 : 14 ] Dignity, in Christian terms, isn't tied to independence or comfort. It's rooted in our identity as God's children.

The frail, the dependent, the dying, they don't lose their worth because they can't control their circumstances. They are not somehow lesser Christians because God has not removed their suffering.

But they do understand surrender. Jesus himself surrendered control, saying, not my will, but yours be done.

For Anglicans, this surrender shapes our moral life. The Church of England, in its statements over the years, has consistently opposed legalised assisting dying, whether here or anywhere else in the world.

Just as the Roma Catholic and the Orthodox churches have. Arguing that it risks undermining the vulnerable, those who might feel pressured to end their lives out of despair or of a sense of being a burden.

[ 19 : 21 ] Just think of the many statements by the Bishop of London, not just a senior bishop in the Church of England, but as the ex-head nurse of the United Kingdom. As I move into my final arguments, I think it's important to bring together Scripture, tradition and our reason.

Apply some logic and apply them with practical concern. Our call to care. If we allow assisted dying, what message does it send to the sick and elderly?

Could it shift our focus away from improving palliative care, pain relief, emotional support, spiritual comfort, and towards a quicker, cheaper exit? Jesus commands us to love our neighbour.

Matthew 22. And in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see that love means stopping, tending and lifting up the wounded. The hospice movement, deeply influenced by Christian principles, shows us what this looks like.

A commitment to walk with people through their final days, easing their pain while honouring their life. And Gareth will pick up this theme in more detail. I know this topic divides us.

[ 20 : 39 ] Some of us have watched a loved one suffer and wondered why they couldn't choose a peaceful end. Indeed, as a nurse, and now as a priest, I have sat with hundreds of people, holding their hands as they die, as they breathe their last breath, in huge pain, in comfort, in peace, in confusion, and everything in between.

I understand the desire to find assisted suicide, to be a mercy. But we must fear a society where death becomes a solution to pain.

As Christians, we don't shy away from these tensions. As members of the Church of England, we've always been proud to say that our theology and doctrine is a broad tent, encouraging wrestling with hard questions.

But at our core, we are bound by the belief that God is the author of life and death. Job, in his anguish, cried out, The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. That trust isn't easy, but it's foundational. So where does that leave us?

[ 22 : 07 ] As Christians, we're called to uphold life's sanctity while pouring out compassion. Assisted dying might promise relief, but it raises risks of eroding trust, of devaluing the weak, of stepping into a role reserved for God.

Stepping into a role that has, and don't misunderstand this, an absolute consequence that we cannot take back.

We should, instead as Christians, be advocating for better care, for communities that surround the dying with love, and for a faith that sees beyond suffering to the hope of resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that death is not the end. The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. This isn't a simple issue, and we won't all agree.

[ 23 : 16 ] But let's hold it before God in prayer. Let's ask for wisdom to care for the hurting, courage to defend the vulnerable, and grace to trust in his purposes, not our own.

Let's walk this path together, not just as Anglicans, not just as the Church of England, but as the Church Universal, reflecting God's love in life, and perhaps more importantly, in death.

Amen.