

Life Assurance: Physical Presence - 25th September 2022

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Date: 25 September 2022

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We're doing things slightly differently as will become clear now. And I know a number of folks will have heard the news over the last couple of days. But it's with real sadness that I need to share that Sue Southall passed away on Friday.

There's a picture of Sue there. Now she was with us just on Thursday morning, helping our little friends. She's been at a house group on Wednesday night in here as well.

But having gone to bed on Thursday evening, she very sadly passed away during the night. Now we trust that it was a peaceful and pain-free way for Sue to go.

But her death, especially in its suddenness this week, well it's been a real shock. And a source of real sadness for us.

But most of all, of course, her family, her children and grandchildren. And our hearts are with them at this time.

[1 : 06] Sue, as many of us all know over the years, has been a huge and active part of our church life here at St. John's. And our community for decades. Someone who willingly and enthusiastically offered her time, her energy and her care in whatever way was needed.

She had a real servant heart. Someone who had such a positive impact on so many lives. Whether through her time running Oscars, her out-of-school group for preschool kids.

Whether through various YPC groups. Little friends more recently dropping. Helping out in the office. Overseeing refreshments. The list could go on because there were so many ways in which she's been involved. But there'll be an opportunity in time to give more fulsome thanks for her life, I know.

Now Sue's been a true friend to many of us over the years. Incredibly thoughtful in how she supported folks. She was very encouraging too.

She'd always have a positive word for me every Monday about Sunday service, for example. And I know for her house group friends in particular, she's been such an integral, loved and loving part of that group as well.

[2 : 28] Sue will be deeply missed by us. And yet, we know as a woman of God, that she is already experiencing the peace and the joy of heaven.

Being welcomed in by the God whom she loved and who she served in such a wholehearted way. As I said, we'll share news of her funeral as and when that comes through.

But for today, we hold before God and alongside each other, both our grief and our gratitude for this very special lady.

Let's pray. Lord God, thank you so much for Sue. For the mum, the grandparent, the friend she's been.

For the difference that her service and her love has made in so many lives. With this news, Lord, our hearts are filled with profound sadness.

[3 : 35] That she's now so suddenly no longer with us in person. But our hearts are also filled with deep gratitude for all that she gave of herself.

And for the pleasure and the privilege that it's been to have shared this life with her. Indeed, we know Sue remains with us in spirit.

And now, ultimately, with you. Cheering us on alongside all her fellow saints in heaven. I pray especially today for Jonathan, for Rob and Laura, for Zach, Noah, Amelia, for all the family.

And for Sue's many friends, Lord, both here and in our wider community. I ask, Lord, that all who are mourning may know your peace, your love, and your comfort at this time.

And we thank you, Jesus, that you are the source of all hope. You are the Lord of life and the conqueror of death. And that you are the resurrection and the life.

[4 : 53] And so it's in the loving name of Jesus that we're able to pray all these things. Amen.

Amen. I've postponed, understandably, what I was going to speak on this week to next week. As it somehow didn't feel the right tone for the week that we've had.

But it does seem right maybe to share a few thoughts today, if I may. A couple of pointers, maybe in the midst of where we're at. Because, well, you all know as well as me, as weeks go, it's been a heavy one.

My goodness. I mean, we had the Queen's funeral on Monday, which would have prompted all sorts of emotions and feelings in each of us. Not least witnessing grief being experienced and processed on a national, even international scale.

That was at the start of the week. And yet, little did we expect the news on Friday of Sue's passing. Well, that's prompted a much more local, personalized grief for many of us.

[6 : 04] Because Sue was one of us. Indeed, if we're fairly new at St. John's or maybe didn't know Sue very well. But the fact that we as a church have suddenly lost one of our own.

Well, that's a sense of grief I'd say we're all called to share in. Because if the Spirit of God has the ability to help us feel initially perhaps welcomed in and united in shared times of joy, then the same Spirit will also prompt feelings of connection to one another in times of grief and sadness too.

We are the body of Christ. We're joined together. We're interconnected. And part of privilege of that connection, part of privilege of being the body of Christ, is that we get to be alongside each other, whether in times of happiness or sadness.

Indeed, with this life assurance series that we've been doing on Sundays, I guess we could say there's a sense of assurance which comes with that connection.

Assurance because we'll have people to celebrate with when times are good, but also people to commiserate with when times are tough. And I guess one of the questions that raises though about this kind of assurance might be this one.

[7 : 27] How might we know that assurance, that connection, in times which might be as heavy as these recent days have been?

How might we know that assurance in times which might be as heavy as these recent days have been? Well, this morning, I want to start by focusing, perhaps unusually for us here at St. John's, on icons, religious icons.

Now, icons, as you may well know, they're rooted not in the West, but in the Eastern Christian church, where from early centuries after Jesus, icons grew in importance.

This is an art form which helped everyday folks to connect with God. And they were important because at a time when comparatively few people could read or write, these pictures are lovingly and carefully created.

We're a way for people to learn about Bible stories or soak up some truth about God, and in particular, often the lives of significant saints and how they expressed their faith.

[8 : 37] I'm going to guess, whereas in the West, perhaps we had stained glass windows in our churches. In the East, there were icons, pictures to go alongside the words of the Bible.

For example, here's a very famous icon of Jesus from St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai in Egypt. That's reckoned to have been painted, I think, in the 6th century.

It's therefore, I think, the oldest icon known of Jesus. Now, I don't know as you look at that, what kind of emotions it prompts in you, whether you like it, whether it doesn't really do it for you.

But as with all icons, there are often hidden depths which are meant to inform our understanding of God through what we see. For example, with this one of Jesus, you may well notice that the face, it feels different on the left than the right.

There are almost two sides to the expression on it. Now, it's reckoned that these two slightly differing sides of Jesus' face here are meant to reflect the fact that Jesus is both human and divine, two faces almost into one.

[9 : 49] Indeed, if we were to slice the picture in half from top to bottom and duplicate, say, the left side and the right side together in a mirror image, the difference between the two sides of Jesus' face becomes clear.

It's almost two different faces, but the artist has somehow combined two different interpretations of Jesus into one face. It's very clever. For the sixth century as well.

Now, if it's true that there's a human and a divine face in one in Jesus, I'll leave you to decide which of those two faces you might think is a human one and which one is a divine one. But I guess we can see how when ancient Christians would have gazed upon this icon, their understanding of its meaning would help inform their prayers and thoughts about what Jesus' humanity and divinity might mean for us in the way that we follow him.

That's one icon of Jesus, a very famous one. But for today, I'd like to focus on a different icon, which is this one here. Now, this is an icon, excuse the history lesson, but it's from the eighth century, which was uncovered in an archaeological dig at the ruins of another monastery in Egypt. And it shows on the left an abbot from the monastery who was called Abbot Mena. And on the right, it shows Jesus. Now, what's interesting about this icon, and I would say actually pretty moving, is that it shows Jesus, if you can see there, with his arm around the abbot, resting on his shoulder.

[11 : 29] It's depicted as a kind of gentle, pretty tender embrace, an arm around the shoulder that one friend would give to another.

You know, icons are often said to provide a window into heaven, artistic depictions of saints or Bible characters, even Jesus himself, and how they might look at their most glorious, since all the gold paint and almost glowing expressions.

And you're often in icons. They're pretty serious things. They're pretty starchy, perhaps, which I don't always find very helpful. But here, with Jesus depicted as simply, but lovingly having his arm around this other guy, around his friend, it seems, a friend who we could say represents each of us. Well, there's a warmth, and there's a security, which I think is pretty special in that picture. Indeed, this icon is consistent with the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, as all through those gospel stories, stories which Jesus, in this icon, is holding in his other hand there.

Well, time and again, Jesus is described as offering a loving, healing hand to those he meets. So, for example, we're told in chapter 10 of Mark's gospel, this, that people were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them.

[13 : 00] And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them, and blessed them. Again, in Mark's gospel, we're told this, that some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.

He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside of the village, taking this blind man, it seems, to a less public, quieter spot away from the crowds where we're told he does proceed to heal his sight.

Again, no, it's an act rooted in Jesus' touch, his hand-holding touch, in this instance. Elsewhere, there's a time when Jesus was transfigured up a mountain, pretty mysterious episode in which the disciples, Peter, James, and John, see Jesus' glory shining through him.

As the voice of God is heard, saying, this is my son, whom I love. We're told that when the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, get up, do not be afraid. And then right through to the last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation, where the writer John had a vision of Jesus as the king of heaven.

[14 : 21] John writes this, he says, when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead, but he placed his right hand on me, saying, do not be afraid, I am the first and the last.

So we see, throughout the New Testament, from young to old, from Jesus at his most earthly to his most heavenly kind of status. Physical touch, you know, this comforting, reassuring, healing touch, where it speaks volumes about the present, caring, compassionate nature of Jesus' love for us.

Indeed, the physical presence of Jesus in our midst at the time of his being here on earth, that's at the heart of what the incarnation is all about, this way in which God comes to be with us in the flesh.

And I would say that the fact of Jesus being here in the flesh, that physical presence is something from which I would say we do well to take a lead.

If we recall, during the pandemic, one of the unwanted social experiments it brought to us was the detrimental impact that physical isolation has upon us.

[15 : 41] You know, the inability, if you recall, to be able to shake hands, to hug, to even at times have a conversation in person without a window between us. You know, we realized as the months went on that even if we're not particularly touchy-feely kind of people ourselves, the lack of physical contact was increasingly detrimental for our mental, even our spiritual well-being.

And yet what's interesting and perhaps even a relief for those of us who aren't naturally tactile or huggy is that it really doesn't take much physical contact to have a lasting beneficial impact on us. For example, there was a scientific study done on the effects that touch can have on sporting teams. In this instance, basketball teams in America.

Now, basketball is classified as a non-contact sport, but for a whole season and across every team in the league, scientists logged every time a player was touched by their teammate, whether that was a pat on the back or a high five, a fist bump, a chest bump, a hug, or whatever, anything that was observable, teammates contact, that was logged game by game.

Now, over the course of the season as all this data was analysed, what they found was that on average each basketball player touched his teammates for about two seconds during the game.

[17:17] Just two seconds. But those brief touches, they mattered. You see, the scientists discovered that the more a team's players touched each other at the beginning of the season, the better the team played by the season's end.

In fact, overall, the highest touching teams not only scored more points, but won a couple more games during the season. And so, even two seconds of intentional, encouraging touch in a game made all the difference.

Now, if you want the science behind this by way of explanation, we know that when we receive welcome physical touch, and it needs to be welcome, obviously we can't go around hugging people if they really don't want to be hugged, but when physical touch is welcomed, apparently it increases the chemical oxytocin in us, that's a feel-good chemical, which nurtures feelings of trust and connection between us, but welcome physical touch also reduces a thing called cortisol, which is a stress hormone.

So a handshake, a hug, a little hand on the shoulder, not only are they scientifically proven to improve well-being and to reduce stress, but if we go back to that icon of Jesus with his arm around Abbot Manor, they're also, I would say, spiritually proven to increase connection, and to reduce stress between us.

And so if we put all that into the context of the week we've had, where many of us are processing grief and our shock at Sue's passing, on top of the emotions which have come with the Queen's funeral, on top of whatever griefs or anxieties or cost of living stresses and so on that we're carrying in everyday life.

[19:21] I'd say there are some helpful pointers for how we might know God's assurance in these times. You see, firstly, I think all this tells us that our physical presence, being here, simply being here alongside each other, it matters.

There's something powerful, even vital, about meeting together in this way, a sense of solidarity and support, for all the benefits of online connection and so on.

Well, being together in person simply can't be replicated in the same way. And I imagine for many of Sue's closest friends among us here in church, some of her family who are with us, for a house group and so on, there was maybe a kind of sense in your gut today, of wanting to be here to support each other today.

I think that's why we tend to make every effort if we can, to be at someone's funeral. That's why I suggest the cues to see the Queen lying in state was so long because we know the importance of turning up in tough times, of being physically present.

Now, for all that in person solidarity, I don't think it really matters the way we meet together, whether that's on a Sunday or a Monday in a house group or down a pub. And I'll speak next week on the need for us to sometimes find respite from the routine and the space from the crowds.

[21:01] But at the same time, whilst we may not always feel the need to be physically present, say, here on a Sunday, day, actually, if we're absent for too long, not only will we lose the benefit of finding friendship and solidarity with others, we'll also stop others from receiving that same solidarity from us.

Yes, I hope we receive by being here, but I also hope we know that we give by being here as well, so that others can receive from our presence as much as we receive from them.

That's the first point, but it leads me on to the second point, because alongside firstly being physically present, secondly, through our presence, we open up the possibility to offer much needed physical touch to people as well.

Now, of course, as I say, any physical touch needs to be offered sensitively and certainly not imposed or forced, and we need to be aware that not everyone, far from it, is a natural hugger.

That goes without saying almost. But as we saw, even just a two-second handshake can be a pretty life-enhancing gift for someone else to receive that day.

[22 : 24] And I'm aware, especially if we live on our own, it might have been some time since we last experienced physical touch from someone else. So not only is physical touch often a good in itself, I think it can also, especially in the context we're in, can take the pressure off having to find the right words to say to someone as well.

Indeed, in times of grief, often there are no words that will bring comfort. But instead, an embrace, a hand, a gentle squeeze of a shoulder, even just sitting next to someone in silence, that can be more than enough for us to know that our grief has been seen, and that we're not grieving in isolation.

Now, to go back to this icon, it's noticeable that Jesus, he isn't saying a word, his mouth is closed, but his actions, his physical touch, speaks volumes.

But then thirdly, and again, just sticking with this icon, it's worth noticing, just as a final point really, it's worth noticing who is doing the blessing here.

You see, this hand gesture that we see in this one of Jesus here, this kind of couple of fingers up, couple of fingers folded down, that kind of one with your right hand, it's a classic kind of blessing hand gesture that's been used in worship and used in art for centuries to convey this sense of God's blessing on us.

[24 : 04] Jesus is holding this hand of blessing out on this icon, for example, but if we go back to this one, it's the abbot who's got his hand out like that, if we can see.

blessing. Now, why might this be significant that it's the abbot doing the blessing? Well, in this picture, we see that Jesus' right hand, which he'd normally do a blessing with, can't do it because he's already got his arm around the abbot's shoulder.

He's busy offering love and care. But that means in turn that just as Jesus has blessed the abbot with his arm around the shoulder, so now the abbot is able to himself offer and be the blessing, passing on the blessing that he's received from Jesus so that others may know the blessing of Jesus through him.

And that, I would suggest, is quite a privilege for us to take on, that we get to be a blessing to others because we ourselves have first been blessed.

In fact, because we no longer have the physical presence of Jesus in our midst, we could say that empowered by the Spirit of God within us, it becomes even more imperative for us to find ways to be a loving, physical, practical blessing to others, offering through us the hands and the feet and the heart of Jesus as we love each other in the way that God has first loved us.

[25 : 41] and actually one final, final point, I know I'll say there's one more, there's one more, again, in this icon, it's a rich icon, I tell you, one final point, the observant among us will notice that here, the abbot's eyes on the left here, you might think it's a mistake by the painter that they're not quite straight, are they?

It looks like one eye is looking straight at us and one eye is off to the side. I think that's intentional because if you think one eye is looking at us, the viewer, the other eye is depicted as looking at Jesus.

It's an illustration, perhaps, I would say, of the way we're called to, yeah, fix our eyes on Jesus, but also at the same time to be looking out to the world, looking out for others, noticing where we can be a blessing and who it is who might need our support.

So it's good in life, on days like today, to be together. It's good to be physically present. It's good to be physically offering a touch of compassion and kindness.

It's good to be searching for ways to be a blessing to each other with what God has first blessed us with. And for me today, for us today, I'd say it's good to know that as Sue takes her heavenly place, as much as we will miss her here, she'll arrive with Jesus, putting his arm around her shoulder, welcoming her in.

[27 : 30] and my prayer is that we may offer that same loving assurance to all those who God has given us the privilege of living alongside.

Amen. Amen.